

British Fell & Hill Running Championship Format

Introduction

This paper has been produced by the British Athletics MRAG Fell Championship Sub-Committee for the Home Country bodies responsible for fell/hill running. The aim is to assess the current situation with regard to the British Fell and Hill Championship series and to put forward proposals as to the best way forward from 2024. The aim is to make the British Fell & Hill Championship the premier event in the fell & hill calendar.

Historical Development of the Championship

In 1990, the British Championship format was reduced from 9 races (3 @ each distance) with best 6 to count (2 @ each distance), to 6 races (2 @ each distance) with best 4 (at least 1@ each distance) to count. This format remained for nearly 20 years until 2009 when the number of races was reduced to four (one in each of the Home Countries) with the best three to count including one at each distance. In 2013, the requirement to complete a race at each distance was removed. This format remained in place for five years, but following concerns that a runner could become British Champion without demonstrating all-round excellence, and consultations with leading runners, it was decided to reinstate the requirement to complete a race at each distance. The change was deferred for a year until 2019 because the super-long Darren Holloway Memorial Buttermere Horseshoe had been selected as the long championship race.

2020: No Championship due to Covid

2021: One-race Championship – although arranged at short notice, the race attracted a quality field and holding a medal presentation on the day gave the event a 'big race' atmosphere. Following the event, a number of the runners stated, mainly for environmental reasons, that they would prefer a one-off championship event.

Current Situation

The British 2022 Championship consisted of four races, one held in each of the Home Countries. Athletes had to complete any three of the four races, with at least one race at each distance. The 2023 series will also follow this format.

However, the number of athletes and the quality of the fields competing in the Championship has been on the decline over recent years. The committee believes that a change should be made to the Championship from 2024 to make it more attractive to athletes.

Reasons for change:**1. Decline in numbers and quality of fields**

	2022	2021	2019	2018	2017
Individual					
Total	40	178	68	126 (93)	
Male	32	138	44	94 (70)	
M (23-39)	6	43	7	41 (41)	
MU23	1	7	1	5 (5)	
M40+	25	88	36	48 (24)	
M50+	18	55	19	30 (15)	
M60+	8	33	7	10 (5)	
Female	8	40	24	32 (23)	
F (23-39)	1	16	7	16 (10)	
FU23	1	5	3	2 (0)	
F40+	6	19	14	14 (13)	
F50+	5	10	6	6 (6)	

Teams

Male	4	8	5	11 (11)	11 (9)
M40+	3	6	4	8 (8)	8 (6)
M50+	4	5	3	5 (5)	6 (5)
Female	1	3	6	8 (8)	7 (5)
F40+	0	1	2	3 (3)	3 (3)

Notes:

1. One-off race in 2021 - totals include DNFs
2. Number of runners include all those who completed the required number of races even if no points scored. The championship tables prior to 2017 only include runners who scored points so only the team figures have been included.
3. Requirement to complete one race at each distance introduced in 2019 (figure in brackets shows numbers if post-2018 requirements were in place)
4. This rule change was scheduled for implementation in 2017 but was postponed until 2018 because the long race was the Buttermere Horseshoe. In 2018, of those runners who completed 3 races, 15 male & 7 female runners ran both medium races & avoided the Buttermere Horseshoe

2022 Championship

The most significant reduction is in the number of non-vet runners although numbers in the 40-49 age range have also fallen. This obviously reflects the quality of the field and is even more noticeable amongst the women.

1. Only eight women completed the required three races and five of those were V50s
2. Only one women's open team completed the required three races
3. No women's V40 teams completed the required three races
4. Team awards. Normally clubs have a core group of athletes who count for their club. In 2022, 78 medals were awarded (even though only one women's team finished the series). At present medals are awarded to all runners who have counted in their

club's best three races; counters in the Men's Open team varied from 8 to 14, indicating that very few athletes were committed to the series. Awarding such high number of medals could be seen to devalue them.

5. The final race in the Black Mountains, lacked depth and numbers:

111 entries

91 starters

87 finishers

75 eligible for the champs (8 unattached & 4 from unaffiliated clubs)

Of these 27 were from 2 clubs – 16 from the host club (Mynydd Du) & 11 from Mercia

The reduction in numbers can only partly be explained by the fact that gold medals in the Men's Open and Under 23 categories had already been won by Finlay Wild (Lochaber) and Harry Bolton (Keswick), whilst Eve Pannone (Eden) had secured both the Women's Open and Under 23 titles.

In recent years, the quality of the British Championship has been diminished because runners are giving a higher priority to their Home Country championship.

2. Participation

Currently very few runners who are not in an English club run in more than one race (i.e their home race). Championships medals are predominantly won by runners from English clubs. Since 2017 (excluding 2021), runners from English clubs have won 91 of the 101 individual medals awarded with Scotland taking six and Wales, four. In addition, the number of medals not awarded has increased each year.

	2022	2019	2018	2017
England	22	23	21	25
Northern Ireland				
Scotland	1	1	4	
Wales		1	1	2

This also applies to team competitions in which very few clubs outside England challenge for medals, whereas this is not the case in the relays.

	2022	2019	2018	2017
England	10	14	13	14
Northern Ireland				
Scotland			1	
Wales			1	1

3. Travel (time and expense)

With the increase in both fuel costs and traffic congestion, the demands on athletes' time and finances are much greater than a few years ago, and could potentially deter people from travelling any distance when there are numerous local races on offer as an alternative.

4. Environmental reasons

A number of runners have suggested that we should address our global footprint as a sport and reduce the amount of travel involved in a championship series by reducing the number of races.

5. Difficulty in finding suitable races for the series

The process for selecting British Championship races is not ideal. The Home Countries select their championship races first and the Championship co-ordinator has to find suitable races for the British series and fit them in, so they are not necessarily held on the most ideal dates. In 2023, the last three races will be held in a seven-week period with the Snowdon race in the middle of this period

6. Congested calendar/Competing interests

Leading runners, particularly in the open and under 23 categories, have many opportunities to represent their county/Home Country/Great Britain; this results in a congested calendar with the British Championship series (see 5. above).

An increasing number of fell runners are now being selected for GB&NI in the World & European Mountain/Trail Running Championship; in 2022, there was a clash between the Scottish race and the Europeans.

7. Quality of prizes

Cash prizes are awarded to the first three men and women in the series with PBS vouchers for the U23 winners.

Prizes for individual races are determined by the race organiser and the value and quality of these prizes do not always reflect the fact that it is a British Championship event.

8. Sponsorship

At the one-off Championship race in 2021, the Director of the current sponsoring company Pete Bland Sports, Matt Bland, said that he had long held the view that he would like to see a change to the current series format to a single race.

The sponsor has become increasingly important to the Championship, given British Athletics is in a poor position financially and the MRAG budget has been reduced.

Future of the Championship, 2024 and beyond

The committee discussed the option of moving to a series where any three of the four races would count, but came to the conclusion that this was only likely to make a minimal improvement to participation as most of the issues described above would still remain. Furthermore, in the 2017 consultation of athletes participating in the British Championship series, the consensus was to change from this option back to the current arrangement.

Proposals

The committee's vision for the Championship is for athletes and clubs to feel the same level of enthusiasm as for the British Fell & Hill Relays. Two options have been considered:

1. A one-race championship, either always of medium distance or rotate distance each year
2. Two separate championships – a short and a long. This would bring fell and hill running into line with other British Athletics Endurance disciplines where Championships take place at different distances e.g. road running has separate Championships at distances from 5k to marathon, and trail running has short, medium and long Championships.

If a format consisting of two separate championships is adopted, individual medals and prizes will be awarded for each race with presentations on the day, but the team championship would be based on the results from both races and team medals would be presented at the FRA 'Do'.

Advantages of proposals

1. Opportunity for increased/wider participation

The one-off race in 2021 attracted both a high quality and quantity field, suggesting that more athletes would be able to participate in this championship format.

Geographically, England (and especially the North of England) is located centrally within the UK so runners from more remote areas (South Wales/North of Scotland) as well as NI could target single championship events.

2. Travel

Athletes would only have to travel to one or two races, potentially halving time and cost and making the proposed championship format more attainable for many.

3. Environmental reasons

As with the reduced travel demands, the knock-on effect would reduce the environmental impact.

4. Regular calendar fixture(s)

The idea was discussed of having (approximate) fixed dates in the annual calendar for the British Championship race(s).

Reducing the number of races will give fell runners the opportunity to run in trials for World & European Mountain/Trail Running Champs - this year, the up & down trial is being combined with the Inter-Counties.

Athletes would then be better able to focus their plans and goals around both this domestic Championship and International trials and competitions.

5. Race selection

The selection process would be similar to that for the relays in that the date(s) and host race would be confirmed around two years in advance; this means that for 2024, the race(s) should be agreed in the next few months. The championship race(s) would ideally remain as a joint counter in each Home Country championship series which means that Home Countries hosting a race can then fit their own championship around their British race. Early confirmation of the British race would enable the other Home Countries to avoid that date for their championship races thus avoiding a clash as well as maximising participation and contribute to decongesting the calendar.

6. Quality of prizes

Fewer events should enable sponsorship and any other funds to be channelled into any single event(s). By attracting more entries, race organisers would be able to offer suitable prizes to attract the leading runners.

7. Sponsorship

The proposed Championship format has the support of the long standing and valued sponsor, Pete Bland Sports. In further discussions with Matt at the British Fell & Hill Relays in October 2022, he expressed enthusiasm for either a one- or two-race championship.

RECOMMENDATION

- The recommendation of the British Championship Sub-Committee is to hold two championship races each year (long & short). One race would be held in England and the other would be 'rotated' around the other Home Countries. Here is a possible schedule:

	Short race	Long race
2024	England	Northern Ireland
2025	Scotland	England
2026	England	Wales
2027	Northern Ireland	England
2028	England	Scotland
2029	Wales	England

The format of the Championship would be reviewed after three years (i.e. before the 2027 series)

These details are provisional and will be amended and agreed by MRAG following consultation with the Home Countries committees.