



## National Athletics League Match 1 – Chelmsford – 7 May 2022

The National Athletics League was established in 2019 as the premier league competition for athletics clubs in the UK, following the dissolution of separate men's (British Athletics League) and women's (UK Women's League) competitions. Having announced its inauguration with a suitable fanfare, the new league's planned first season in Summer 2020 was ultimately then completely cancelled due to Covid – and in 2021, a cut-down, regional format was used instead of the full competition, as the UK started to emerge from the pandemic.

Hence, Saturday's opening match of the NAL's first proper competitive season was an event awaited with much anticipation. Chelmsford AC had been placed in the NAL's 'Championship' division – effectively the second division, and the club's athletes were keen to get off to a good start in establishing themselves as real contenders at this level.

Chelmsford's first fixture was hosted by Havering AC – albeit at Chelmsford's own home track, at Melbourne Park. The other competing teams were from Basingstoke & Mid Hants AC, Bedford & County, Bournemouth AC, City of Liverpool, Herts Phoenix AC and Peterborough & Nene Valley AC.

On a largely sunny day, the action commenced in the Field, with the Women's Long Jump, where U20 athlete Zion Ateba was making her debut for Chelmsford – and on a day when her combined performances ultimately made her Chelmsford's Women of Match, she announced herself with the first of three PB's, and an excellent third place. The Men's Pole Vault was also under way early on, and U17 Jack Hughes was by no means overawed, also claiming a superb third place in amongst more senior athletes.

Josephine Larkins took fourth place in the Women's Hammer, and Kevin Wilson made his first contribution of the day with a fine third place in the Men's Discus, as the Field events continued.

The first race on the Track was the Men's 400m Hurdles. U20 Onyeka Okoh has been in incredible form this season already, leading the UK U20 rankings for the event, and breaking the club's senior record on several occasions. Coming into the final straight, neck and neck with current Senior UK No.6 James Webster of Liverpool, however, Onyeka clipped the final hurdle and was sent sprawling. To his credit, he still picked himself up and crossed the line in fourth, to ensure that Chelmsford's points total continued to climb.

U17 Holly Watson claimed a fine fourth in the Women's 800m, competing well against a field of experienced Senior athletes. Finlay Staff (U20) also had a good day, with a new PB in the 800m, and finishing third in a very close race.

Back in the Field, Alex Reynolds was making his first appearance in a Chelmsford AC vest since 2018, and he celebrated an excellent return with second place in the Men's Hammer. Yasha Bobash was only 10cm behind him, in third place, to secure a handsome points tally for Chelmsford in the event.

Another multi-talented U20 athlete, Oliver Early started his day with a superb second place in the Men's Long Jump, not far short of a PB – and fellow U20 Johnson Alo secured another great points return for the team by taking fourth place.



Maegan Hopkins, an U17 athlete was making her debut for the Senior team – and was another to not be fazed by the level of competition, as she took second place in the Women’s Discus, with a PB performance – and event where she was ably supported by Jade Harding, who was making a return from a broken foot, competing in the first of three Throws events on the day.

It was then back to the Track for the always highly anticipated 100m races – and another debutant – Lee Dollard was in his way to ultimately being made Chelmsford’s Man of the Match by taking second place, just 0.05 seconds behind the winner. Kissiwaa Mensah (U20) and Cara Duncan (U17) were Chelmsford’s entries in the Women’s 100m – and both took excellent third places, in the A and B string races respectively.

There was a PB double in the Men’s Steeplechase for both new athlete Sebastian Cirillo and young Will Nuttall - finishing 2nd (A string) and 1st (B string) respectively - Will giving everything on the final lap to snatch the B win in the last few metres, by just 0.3 of a second.

Bradley Reed and Kristian Brown both ran terrific races in the Men’s 110mH, to each take second place – in the A and B races – keeping the Chelmsford points tally looking very healthy.

Kevin Wilson was then back in action in the Men’s Shot, adding 12cm to his PB, and claiming second place in the A string event. Veteran Roger Skedd was in close support in the B string, displaying a fine return to form in this event, and later, in the Javelin, where he took fourth place.

Kirsty Ronald then claimed further vital points with third place in the Women’s Triple Jump, and Lily Brand – another young athlete making her Senior debut – matched that position in the Women’s Javelin.

U20 Darcy Sullivan is still recovering from a hamstring injury, and consequently had to start the Men’s 400m from a standing start rather than using blocks – but still ran sub 50 seconds for the first time, improving his PB by nearly a second. Later in the day he went on to run another sub 50 second split on the anchor leg to secure a Chelmsford win in the 4x400m relay.

Despite suffering from knee problems, Rebecca Quinlan was back in excellent form, taking second place (and a PB) in the 800m B race, and third place in the 1500m A.

The Men’s High Jump saw a maximum points haul for Chelmsford. Returning to something like his old form after four years of injury problems, Tom Hewes dominated the event, eventually clearing a fine 2.10m – 15cm ahead of the rest of the field. Oliver Early followed up his performance in the Long Jump by taking top ranking in the B event.

Lee Dollard followed up his own excellent 100m performance with a brilliant third place in an exceptionally tight 200m race. Adam Reid recorded a personal best time in the B race, finishing 4th. Kissiwaa Mensah and Erin Minton-Branfoot (with a PB) both claimed second places in the Women’s 200m, in the A and B races. Zach Bridgeland and Nick Hardy then kept Chelmsford’s points tally ticking over with third and fifth place in the 5000m.

Lola Kuponiyi then crowned the last individual event of the day by taking a huge win in the Women’s Shot – her mark of 13.40m over 1.5m further than the next best.

In the 4x400m Relays, the Women’s team of Nneka Okoh, Erin Minton-Branfoot, Kissiwaa Mensah and Holly Watson claimed an excellent second place, while the Men (Kristian Brown, Darcy Sullivan,



Onyeka Okoh and Will Steadman) went one better, winning their event in the best time a Chelmsford AC team has recorded for several decades,

In the final analysis, Chelmsford's solid performances across all events, in both the Men's and Women's events, saw the team open their first full NAL campaign with a superb win – the provisional match score being:

1. Chelmsford AC:	560
2. Basingstoke & Mid Hants:	494
3. Havering AC:	482
4. City of Liverpool	439
5. Herts Phoenix AC:	348
6. Bournemouth AC:	333
7. Bedford & County:	294
8. Peterborough & Nene Valley AC:	214

The team will now go into their next match, in Manchester, on 4<sup>th</sup> June, feeling very confident that they can consolidate their position towards the top of the early 2022 NAL Championship table.