

Varsity Match 2005 Race Report

The Oxford women power away into victory in triathlon Varsity.

Canadian rowing Olympian Buffy Williams won the women's individual gold at the triathlon varsity match in Eversholt in Buckinghamshire on Sunday 15 May. The Oxford women's team made up of Buffy Williams, Rachel Hughes and Nerys Hughes finished 17 minutes clear of the Cambridge team, scoring the first victory for Oxford in the 3 years since the triathlon varsity matches began.

The race: 400m swim, 20km bike, 5km run.

The chilly morning combined with a pool swim in an open-air pool made for an interesting start. The organisers sought to start everyone off for the swim at closely spaced intervals, no doubt with the best of intentions. With the slower swimmers off first, however, things started going wrong when the faster swimmers began to catch up with the earlier waves in the narrow swim lanes. The result was a bit chaotic, where fighting your way to the front was an actual battle and where survival of the fittest seemed to take a literal meaning. Oxford's Luke Walton emerged with the fastest time at 5:57 with Cambridge's Matt Robinson 15 seconds behind.

The 20km bike leg that followed the swim was undemanding other than for the fact that everyone was starting off drenched to the bone at temperatures around 10 degrees centigrade. On the downhills the chilly morning air snuffed your breath away. Fastest man home was Cambridge's Steven Stuart who whizzed through the bike course at a speed of 43 km/h. Steven had punctured at the Varsity 25mile Time Trial the weekend before and had decided to compete for triathlon at the last minute to salvage something of his season. Ahead of everyone else at the end of the bike leg, he was set to win the men's individual gold, which he did despite the best efforts of Oxford's Luke Walton, Geoff Roberts and Thom Ringer to make up time on the 5km run. With strong performances also from Matt Robinson and Ed Richardson, Cambridge won the men's team competition with a margin of nearly 8 minutes over Oxford. This had nevertheless been a fine day for the Oxford men, considering that Luke had been unable to run because of injury since Cross Country Varsity, when he had helped the dark blues to a win over Cambridge. And Thom had been competing with a cold and on a borrowed bike after his own had been damaged in transit on a flight the week before.

Cambridge had its share of misfortune, too. James Third, who had finished 5th at the BUSA triathlon two weeks earlier, could not compete because of an injury. And Cambridge's top woman Emma Pooley, currently Duathlon World Champion in her age

group, suffered a puncture early in the bike course. Rather than give up there and then, she ran the 10km to transition barefoot pushing her punctured bike all along the way. She then went off undaunted on the run to finish the 5km run leg in the fastest time of the day for a woman at 21:24.

This kind of tenacity is what makes triathlon really different from other sports. Emma, Luke and Thom still competed in the face of adversity, even when it seemed pointless. As Mark Jenkins showed in the Athens Olympics, triathlon is as much about going beyond oneself as it is about winning a race.