

ESAA – SUCCESS STORY

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DOCUMENT HISTORY

This document was written for use as an England Athletics exhibit at the 2020 English Schools' Athletic Association (ESAA) Track and Field Championships. Unfortunately the event had to be cancelled because of the global COVID pandemic. England Athletics then decided to hold the exhibition as an online one and created a new website (www.theathleticsmuseum.org.uk) for this and other exhibitions in the future. A very much abbreviated version of this document, only 10 lines, was made available on the website in August 2020.

I have continued to update the document taking into account the further successes of English Schools competitors at all relevant championships up to the end of 2025.

BACKGROUND

The English Schools' Athletic Association (ESAA) was named the Schools' Athletic Association (SAA) when it was formed in 1925. It became the ESAA in 1961. The first Track and Field Championships were held in 1925. Cross Country events were added in 1960 for Boys and in 1968 for Girls. Race Walking was added in 1968 for Boys and in 1974 for Girls. Finally Combined Events was added in 1988.

Since the formation of the SAA in 1925, 21,798 medals have been presented in the 7,269 individual events. A further 505 relay races have been held including 9 mixed relays. **Over 13,500 different competitors have won at least one medal at ESAA Championships.**

For the purposes of this research, generally only information from 1960 has been used. The 25 exceptions to this are pre-1960 SAA competitors who won WAAA / AAA championships or other major championship medals after 1960.

Between 1925 and 1960 the SAA Track and Field Championships had developed from a one age-group, 13 counties event with 14 track and field events into a 3 age-group event with all English counties competing and made up of 57 events. It now comprises a mammoth 101 events just for track and field. Cross Country, Combined Event and Race Walking Championships have all been added since 1960.

In 2019, a list of ESAA Boys and Girls Medallists details made available from the ESAA was a good starting point for this study. All ESAA results since then, up to and including the 2026 ESAA Cross Country have been taken into account. There have been 19,049 medals issued in the 6,353 individual events held at the ESAA Championships from 1960 to the end of 2025. **Over 11,100 different competitors have won at least one medal at ESAA Championships since 1960.**

I have compared the ESAA data with my lists of champions and medallists from the British Championships (AAA or WAAA or British Athletic Championships), Olympic Games, World Championships, European Championships and Commonwealth Games. The annual AAA and WAAA Championships were usually regarded as the British Championships until 2006 after which UK Athletics ran the annual British Athletic Championships. For the purposes of this document I will use the term British Championships unless the item refers specifically to the AAA/WAAA era.

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MAJOR SENIOR EVENT SUCCESS

Since 1960, **792 ESAA competitors** (378 girls and 414 boys) have progressed to become British Champions and/or have won medals at the Olympic Games, World Championships, European Championships or Commonwealth Games. *It is interesting to note that 159 of these athletes (74 girls and 85 boys) did not win an ESAA Championship medal.*

325 of the ESAA Girl competitors have gone on to win a British Championship title. This is 63% of all the British Women's champions from 1960 to 2025.

In the same period 352 ESAA Boy competitors have won a British Championship title. This equates to 49% of all the British Men's champions from 1960 to 2025.

It is worth noting that for much of the earlier years, till 1995, the WAAA and AAA Championships were 'Open' to athletes from other countries. They were such prestigious events that many of the great athletes of the day competed in them. It was therefore even more difficult for the English athletes to win. Athletes like Trevor Burton (Staffordshire), 3rd in the 1960 and 1961 ESAA Senior Pole Vault events, were particularly unlucky. In the 1964 AAA event he vaulted the same height as the soon-to-be 1964 Olympic Champion Fred Hansen (USA) but finished 2nd. He was also the highest finishing English athlete behind non-UK athletes in the 1962 and 1965 AAA Championships but never won the British title.

In fact 35% (433) of the British title winners since 1960 were athletes who represented a country other than England or were born and raised in another country and so did not attend an English school. There are also 31 instances of British Championship winners who had no corresponding ESAA event for them to win.

The number of ESAA Girls and Boys Championship competitors going on to win medals at the 4 major Championships (the Olympic Games, the World and European Championships and the Commonwealth Games) is also extremely impressive. Since 1960, a staggering 206 Girl and 216 Boy competitors have won at least one medal at these events.

In this period there have been 105 different English Olympic medallists, 98 of whom could have competed in an ESAA event. 89% (87) of them did compete in the ESAA championships. The ESAA competitor percentages of English medallists at the other major championships range from **86% to 89%.**

ESAA GIRL MEDALLISTS (1960 to 2025)

The breakdown of the medallists in individual events in the ESAA Girls Championships since 1960 is as follows :

EVENT TYPE	FROM	TITLES	MEDAL WINNERS	DIFFERENT CHAMPIONS	DIFFERENT 2 nd / 3 rd PLACERS
Track and Field	1960	2372	7122	1558	2492
Cross Country	1968	168	504	132	213
Race Walking	1974	152	439	86	113
Combined Events	1988	111	333	83	134

The 'DIFFERENT CHAMPIONS' above shows how many athletes won an ESAA title while the 'DIFFERENT 2nd / 3rd PLACERS' shows how many non-champions gained at least one silver or bronze medal. Note that the Track and Field totals do *NOT* include the 192 relay finals held between 1960 and 2025 or the athletes involved in them.

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BRITISH WOMEN'S CHAMPIONS – 519 DIFFERENT CHAMPIONS (from 1,189 Events)

The 518 British Women's Championship winners since 1960 include 160 British champions who represented a country other than England *or* were born and raised in another country and so did not attend an English school *or* had no corresponding ESAA event that they could have won.

These 159 British champions include 84 non-UK champions (mainly from when the WAAA Championships were 'open' to all nations) and 50 from the 'Home Countries' (made up of 7 from Northern Ireland, 32 from Scotland and 11 from Wales) and 14 English athletes who were born or raised in another country. A further 12 of them (7 race walkers, 3 pole vaulters, 1 hammer thrower and a triple jumper) are British champions who could not have appeared in an ESAA championship as there was no ESAA event for them at the time.

325 ESAA Girl Competitors have won at least 1 British Title since 1960.

The breakdown of these ESAA competitors is as follows :

ESAA Champions	- 194
ESAA Silver / Bronze Medallists	- 66
ESAA Non-Medallists	- 65

This represents 63% of all British champions (518) from 1960 to 2025.

ESAA BOYS COMPETITORS (from 1960 to 2025)

The breakdown of the competitors in the ESAA Boys Championships since 1960 is as follows :

EVENT TYPE	FROM	TITLES	MEDAL WINNERS	DIFFERENT CHAMPIONS	DIFFERENT 2 nd / 3 rd PLACERS
Track and Field	1960	3071	9245	2280	3774
Cross Country	1960	192	587	163	283
Race Walking	1968	167	478	103	138
Combined Events	1988	111	333	87	156

The 'DIFFERENT CHAMPIONS' above shows how many athletes won an ESAA title while the 'DIFFERENT 2nd / 3rd PLACERS' shows how many non-champions gained at least one silver or bronze medal. Note that the Track and Field totals do *not* include the 192 relay finals held between 1960 and 2025 or the athletes involved in them.

BRITISH MEN'S CHAMPIONS – 718 DIFFERENT CHAMPIONS (from 1,370 EVENTS)

The 718 British title winners include 305 British champions who represented a country other than England *or* were born and raised in another country and so did not attend an English school *or* where there was no corresponding ESAA event for them to win.

These 305 British champions are made up of 212 non-UK champions (mainly from when the AAA Championships were 'open' to all nations), 64 from the 'Home Countries' (5 from Northern Ireland, 28 from Scotland and 31 from Wales) and 10 English athletes who were born or raised in another country. A further 19 of them (10 race walkers, one hammer thrower, a pole vaulter and 7 decathletes) were British champions who could not have appeared in an ESAA championship as there was no ESAA event for them at the time. These

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athletes included the British race walking 'greats' Ken Matthews, Paul Nihill, Roger Mills, Ron Wallwork and Stan Vickers.

350 ESAA Boys competitors have won at least 1 British Title since 1960.

They are made up of the following :

ESAA Champions	- 189
ESAA Silver / Bronze Medallists	- 87
ESAA Non-Medallists	- 74

This represents 49% of all British champions (718) from 1960 to 2025.

BRITISH CHAMPIONSHIPS AND ESAA SUMMARY

The number of different English champions in the British Championships since 1960 and the numbers of those who have competed at the ESAA championships are as follows :

	Women	Men
Champions	519	718
- Non UK athlete	84	212
- Home Country athlete	62	83
- Educated Abroad	14	10
- No ESAA Event	12	19
+ Home Country athlete but also an ESAA competitor	12	19
Gives maximum possible number of ESAA Competitors	359	413
Actual ESAA Competitors winning British Titles	325	352
ESAA % of British Champions	91%	85%

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR AN ESAA CHAMPION TO BECOME BRITISH CHAMPION ?

From 1960 to 2025, 194 ESAA Girls champions progressed to win a British Women's Championship title. They took an average of 5½ years to become British Champion. Four champions, namely Susan Allday, Sharon Colyear, Kathy Smallwood and Sue Hearnshaw won the British title the same year as their only (or last) ESAA title success whereas Jenny Meadows took 16 years although to be fair that was from being an ESAA junior champion.

In the same period 189 ESAA Boys champions progressed to win a British Men's Championship title. They took an average of 5½ years to become British Champion. 11 of them won the British title the year after their only (or last) ESAA title success whereas Harry Aikines-Aryeetey took 16 years although that was from being an ESAA intermediate champion.

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ESAA COMPETITORS GOING ON TO WIN MEDALS AT MAJOR ATHLETIC EVENTS

Since 1960, 206 ESAA Girl competitors have won medals at one or more of the major championships (the Olympic Games, the World Championships, the European Championships or the Commonwealth Games).

52 of those competitors did not win a British title.

They include the following :

- 8 Olympic Gold Medallists and 35 other Olympic Medallists (Silver, Bronze or Relay)
- 6 World Gold Medallists and 33 other World Medallists (Silver, Bronze or Relay)
- 11 European Gold Medallists and 70 other European Medallists (Silver, Bronze or Relay)
- 29 Commonwealth Games Gold Medallists and 151 other Commonwealth Games Medallists (Silver, Bronze or Relay)

Since 1960, 216 ESAA Boy competitors have won medals at one or more of the major championships (the Olympic Games, the World Championships, the European Championships or the Commonwealth Games).

64 of those competitors did not win a British title.

They include the following :

- 7 Olympic Gold Medallists and 40 other Olympic Medallists (Silver, Bronze or Relay)
- 7 World Gold Medallists and 42 other World Medallists (Silver, Bronze or Relay)
- 27 European Gold Medallists and 61 other European Medallists (Silver, Bronze or Relay)
- 41 Commonwealth Games Gold Medallists and 141 other Commonwealth Games Medallists (Silver, Bronze or Relay)

The number of different English medallists in the major championships since 1960 and the numbers of those who have competed at the ESAA championships or County SAA championships are as follows :

	Olympics	World Champs	European Champs	Commonwealth Games
Medallists	125	128	219	405
- Educated Abroad	1	8	10	13
- No ESAA Event	4	0	4	5
leaves ESAA achievable	120	120	205	387
ESAA / County SAA Competitors	107	109	180	336
ESAA %	89%	91%	88%	87%