

Forty nine Stratford AC athletes across six age groups did the club proud on the first full weekend of 2012 in the Warwickshire County Cross Country Championships at Solihull Sixth Form College.

The event started out sunny and cool and finished rather grey and quite a lot cooler! Underfoot conditions were ideal; a mix of good to soft sections, some firmer passages through woods, and one field which became slushier as the day wore on and runners turned the ground over.

The Under 17/Under 20 Women were given the honour of racing first. Tas Pope (8<sup>th</sup>, 20.17 – 7<sup>th</sup> U17 age group) and Lucy McDermott (11<sup>th</sup>, 21.05 – 8<sup>th</sup> U17) were, as we have come to expect, in close proximity and both produced their usual high standard. Tas stepped up from U15 this year and performed impressively, Lucy was two places higher than she was in this race at Cofton Park in 2011.

There were two club representatives in the Under 15 Boys race, Alex Beckett (19<sup>th</sup>, 15.49) and Matthew Bayliss (34<sup>th</sup>, 17.14) both of whom raced intelligently and paced themselves well.

In the Under 15 Girls race, the team finished 4<sup>th</sup> overall. Caroline Fury (11<sup>th</sup>, 17.34) led the girls home, followed in quick succession by the speedy quartet comprising 800m specialist Abigail Flynn (16<sup>th</sup>, 18.18), mudlark Sophie Dobedoe (17<sup>th</sup>, 18.21), 1500m and cross country regular Rachel Chandler (20<sup>th</sup>, 19.09) and purveyor of middle distance speed endurance Rachel Jones (21<sup>st</sup>, 19.12).

There were many magnificent performances in the Senior/Masters Women's race. Dani Rasgauski (7<sup>th</sup>, 23.36 - 6<sup>th</sup> Senior) was the star, showing how much she has come on in the last 12 months thanks to some confidence-building races on and off-road and hard but sensible training. The sky is now the limit!

Kate Wright (11<sup>th</sup>, 23.56 - 2<sup>nd</sup> Masters) was satisfied to finish 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Masters but will have her sights set on regaining her position at the head of affairs for the club in the next cross country event!

Dawn Compton (18<sup>th</sup>, 24.50 – 5<sup>th</sup> M) arrived at the venue with just five minutes to spare before the start. Dawn is known for being laid-back but this was cutting things a bit fine! Dawn ran really well despite having to treat the early part of the race as a fast-paced warm-up!

Sarah Wheeler (24<sup>th</sup>, 25.18 - 7<sup>th</sup> M) has upped her game a notch over the past couple of months and knows she is capable of continuing to push herself to even better things in each race.

Emma Bexson (26<sup>th</sup>, 25.36 – 9<sup>th</sup> M) and Alison Bagnall (29<sup>th</sup>, 25.50 – 11<sup>th</sup> M) battled well against the testing but fair course.

Emma Vickers (46<sup>th</sup>, 28.05 – 20<sup>th</sup> M) would have preferred a couple more laps to really use her stamina. Rose Morris (83<sup>rd</sup>, 35.36 – 48<sup>th</sup> M) will have gained a lot from the experience and it will be great to see her in the team for many more races.

The Masters 'A' team (Kate, Dawn, Sarah) won the Masters prize and just for good measure the 'B' team (Emma B, Alison, Emma V) were 2<sup>nd</sup>. This is proving to be a brilliant season for the ladies and can only breed further success in the year ahead!

Fergus Allison put in a glorious performance to finish 7<sup>th</sup> in the Under 13 Boys race in 12.16. Oliver Evans (32<sup>nd</sup>, 14.40) also made an excellent impression and did well up the long uphill finish.

Despite usually competing at half of this 3000m distance at Under 11 level, Georgina Mitchell competed in the Under 13 race and ran a blinder to be 13<sup>th</sup> in 13.36. Ysabelle Caswell (15<sup>th</sup>, 13.54) pushed Georgina all the way and Harriet Flynn (21<sup>st</sup>, 14.05) was hot on her heels too.

Hannah Bexson (25<sup>th</sup>, 14.22) had a splendid end to 2011 and has started this year just as well. Jessica Sheppard (33<sup>rd</sup>, 15.10) enjoyed a battle all the way to the finish with three other girls. The U13 team finished 6<sup>th</sup> overall.

The Under 17 and Under 20 Men ran in one race and five of Stratford AC's finest displayed their current form and their wonderful potential. Jack McMullen (16<sup>th</sup>, 20.52 – 9<sup>th</sup> U20) who has been competing in Senior races this winter made good use of his experience and secured a pleasing top 10 finish.

Josh Newman (26<sup>th</sup>, 21.45 – 13<sup>th</sup> U20) ran a strong race, Howard Allison (28<sup>th</sup>, 22.17 – 14<sup>th</sup> U17) showed well in his first U20 County event and Sam Taylor (37<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, 23.09 – 18<sup>th</sup> U20) is looking fitter all the time. Also in fine form in for the u17s was Liam Cole (38<sup>th</sup>, 23.15 – 20<sup>th</sup> U17). The U20 team finished 3<sup>rd</sup>.

By the time the Senior/Masters men took to the stage, the course was getting quite cut-up and slippery around some of the tighter corners. Rob Minton (35<sup>th</sup>, 35.38 – 21<sup>st</sup> Senior) wasn't ecstatic with his race, set-off too fast on the first couple of laps and having to tap into his energy reserves earlier than he might have liked. Despite his tactical misgivings, 21<sup>st</sup> Senior finisher is not a bad position at all and Rob was 16 places higher than in 2011.

Danny Tolhurst (50<sup>th</sup>, 36.53 – 32<sup>nd</sup> S) allowed himself a smile of satisfaction at the finish. He is returning to something like his best form due to some focused training over the Christmas period.

Andy Cockerill (69<sup>th</sup>, 38.08 – 29<sup>th</sup>, Masters) was handily placed throughout and he was 3<sup>rd</sup> home for the club.

A bout of flu meant Chris Bacon (91<sup>st</sup>, 39.16 – 44<sup>th</sup> Masters) just hoped to get around the course and do reasonably well. Chris's infamous boots didn't help him negotiate the muddy bends, however Keith Hawkes (92<sup>nd</sup>, 39.36 – 45<sup>th</sup> Masters) did enjoy watching from 50 yards behind and thanked Chris for taking his mind off how tired he was feeling.

By his own admission Michael Warner (97<sup>th</sup>, 40.15 – 49<sup>th</sup> M) sets off far too quickly. However, it can be a struggle to teach an old dog new tricks and Michael is posting some good results however he chooses to run!

Two triathlon regulars Alan Coley-Smith (117<sup>th</sup>, 42.23 – 65<sup>th</sup> M) and Graham Black (122<sup>nd</sup>, 42.40 – 69<sup>th</sup> M) showed their off-road running abilities. David Smyth (126<sup>th</sup>, 43.20 – 73<sup>rd</sup> M) and James Lyall (129<sup>th</sup>, 43.28 – 75<sup>th</sup> M) were never far apart.

Paul Hawkins (139<sup>th</sup>, 44.12 – 8<sup>th</sup> M) enjoyed the four hours he spent managing the other age-groups and was raring to go by race-time. He looked full of beans coming up the finishing hill. Steve Kirk (141<sup>st</sup>, 44.25 – 86<sup>th</sup>) is surprising himself with his smashing form of late.

Roger Wilson (159<sup>th</sup>, 46.08 – 102<sup>nd</sup> M), Peter Evans (161<sup>st</sup>, 46.29 – 104<sup>th</sup> M) and Pete Hill (163<sup>rd</sup>, 46.55 – 106<sup>th</sup> M) used their cross-country nous to put in excellent rounds although Peter didn't really extend himself.

There was pressure on Andy Turner (164<sup>th</sup>, 47.06 – 107<sup>th</sup> Senior) to do well once he donned his new bright blue spikes and set off like the clappers, as is his wont. Andy stuck to his task well and just stayed ahead of Phil Marshall (166<sup>th</sup>, 47.15 – 107<sup>th</sup> M).

Luke Watkins (169<sup>th</sup>, 49.27 – 60<sup>th</sup> Senior), Mike Barrie (170<sup>th</sup>, 49.36 – 110<sup>th</sup> M), Mike Barrett (171<sup>st</sup>, 50.00 – 11<sup>th</sup> M) and Larry Coltman (172<sup>nd</sup>, 50.07 – 112<sup>th</sup> M) had their own mini-race and were covered by just 40 seconds at the finish.

The Senior Men's team (Rob, Danny, Andy T, Luke) were 9<sup>th</sup>. The Masters 'A' team (Andy C, Chris, Keith, Michael) finished 9<sup>th</sup>, the B (Alan, Graham, David, James), C (Paul, Steve, Roger, Peter E) and D (Pete H, Phil, Mike, Mike) teams were 14<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> respectively.

A very successful and inspiring day at the races. Team Manager Paul Hawkins said the spirit in the camp was summed up by Jonathan Furey who arrived ready to run despite being very unwell as he knew he was needed to make a team up. Paul had to persuade Jonathan to avoid running and making himself more ill but said Jonathan's attitude was superb.

What a day! It was fabulous to see so many competing and enjoying their racing as well as supporting their clubmates.