

Whilst spring and autumn are perhaps better known as the prime marathon times in the UK, these seasons also contain the majority of road relay contests. Stratford AC's teams have been involved in three in the last few weeks culminating in the fantastic achievement of qualifying for a senior national final for the first time in the club's history. This Saturday afternoon in Birmingham will see the men's team compete against the cream of English road running when they take their place amongst the country's top 75 clubs on the start line in the National 12-Stage Road Relays.

The busy period started gently with the club making its first appearance down in Oxford at the Teddy Hall Relays. This hugely enjoyable and competitive event is organised by the Oxford University Cross Country Club and saw a record turnout of 111 men's teams, 43 women's teams and 41 mixed teams from universities, athletic clubs and the services. The race starts from the famous Iffley Road track following a 3.6-mile route around the city centre, through Christ Church Meadows and along the side of the river, although the young intellectual cream of the nation did go wrong on a couple of occasions causing fun and games! The women's teams run 3 legs, with the men doing 4, and the Stratford ladies did a great job to finish in 18th place. Tracey Bailey (25:57), Yvonne Caswell (25:17) and Dawn Davies (25:59), whilst looking young enough to be a student team, all displayed experienced pacing on their runs. The men's teams, looking rather more like mature students, will be pleased with 28th and 78th places, especially with Paul Hawkins doing a leg for each and Steve Marshall doing one each for his college and the club. Paul (23:27), Rob Minton (20:15), Keith Hawkes (22:25) and Steve (21:27) gave a total of 87:34 minutes for the A team, and Phil Marshall (25:31), Geoff Hillman (25:39), Pete Law (25:38) and Paul (25:06) put the B team on 101:54 minutes.

The next relay to take place was the Warwickshire championships, which is quite a low-key event compared to the other two, and therefore a good chance for the less experienced to get used to the format. On a bitterly cold afternoon at Sutton Park in Birmingham the Stratford ladies came an excellent 8th out of the 19 complete teams, whilst the men were a fine 20th out of 38 complete teams, Coventry Godiva winning both events. Catherine Clifford (17:44), Dawn Davies (19:39) and Georgina Hutsby (19:10) put the club well up the listings over the 2.75-mile undulating circuit, at the same time as Rob Minton (14:30), Phil Howell (17:12), Paul Hawkins (17:24) and Neil Hawkins (14:52) were doing the same for the males.

The last of the three events was the Midlands version, used as a qualifier for the national finals along with the equivalent North and South versions, with teams of 12 for the men and 6 for the women. This also takes place in Sutton Park, using the harder reverse 3-mile loop to the one used in the county's, and it is only in the last couple of years that the club has grown enough to support full participation in these regional events, let alone the national finals.

The women's contest was won comfortably by a strong Charnwood team with Stratford finishing in a very respectable 22nd position, despite unfortunately losing Dawn Davies through illness. Her late replacement Simone Ryder (24:37) performed admirably on leg

3 with little notice, the team having already been given a flying start by Yvonne Caswell (20:42) and Tracey Bailey (21:07). Catherine Clifford (19:59) was then an excellent 9th quickest overall on the 4th leg, and with Sue Le Belleguy (26:15) and Jane Mason (26:44) putting in strong runs on their relay debuts to bring the team home in a total of 2 hours 19:27 minutes, all 6 can be proud of their efforts.

Bristol might not always be considered to be in the Midlands geographically, but it certainly is part of this large region from a running viewpoint and they took the men's title from Nottingham in 2nd place. The male competition differs slightly from the females in that 4 of the 12 legs have a further out and back section inserted into the middle of the loop, and with Rob Minton another late flu victim the four lucky Stratford runners to get these 5.5-mile stages were late substitute Phil Howell (35:19) on leg 1, Phil Goodchild (34:25) an impressive leg 4, ironman Wayne Vickers (35:12) on leg 7 and Steve Donnelly (33:18) a flying stage 10. Steve Kirk (18:45) and Paul Hawkins (19:09) flew the flag on legs 2 and 3, with club debutant David Maundrell (22:37) on stage 5 and Neil Hawkins (16:13) an explosive 7th fastest overall on leg 6. Tony Jackson (19:00) and a lightning fast Joe Brocklehurst (16:46), 8th fastest leg 9, linked Wayne Vickers and Steve Donnelly, before Phil Marshall (21:19) and Pete Evans (19:12) rounded off a great team performance. This gave the boys a total time of 4 hours 51:21 minutes and 27th place, on the face of it not quite enough to make the top 25 and the national finals until the few B teams of the large clubs are taken out of the equation. With the national finals also being held in Sutton Park, Saturday afternoon will see Stratford AC reach another milestone in their club's development.