

Despite the fact that the running calendar at this time of year is dominated by London Marathon build-up events there are a host of spectacular off-road races that give competitors the chance to give their joints a rest from pounding the streets, and at the same time see different parts of our green and pleasant land.

Over in Worcestershire though it was perhaps more of a brown and pleasant land due to the mud! At one stage there was almost a danger that the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary Wyre Forest 8 might not be its usual quagmire self but, in what has been a notoriously dry winter, a well-timed downpour and a rise in temperatures the night before gave this difficult event its normal conditions. With the race starting and finishing from the Visitors Centre at Callow Hill, near Bewdley, the 8-mile multi-terrain takes place mainly on the undulating trails through the forest, making for a picturesque but tough challenge. With special commemorative medals and invitations to all the past winners there was a slightly special feel about this year's race, and Stratford AC's Kate Wright almost made that winner's list as her storming run gave her 2<sup>nd</sup> place in both the overall ladies and over-40s categories. Kate's sparkling winter just seems to get better and better, and her time of 57:28 minutes put her exactly 1 minute behind the ladies winner Jane Rowlands of Ludlow Runners, and 28<sup>th</sup> overall. Fellow Stratford club members Sarah Odell and John Butler kept Kate company, with Sarah especially also putting in an excellent showing. She recorded a time of 68:04 to finish well in the top half of the field, 130<sup>th</sup> out of the 326 finishers, and 6<sup>th</sup> lady in the female O35s, whilst club veteran John Butler completed the course in 96:50 minutes to be placed 321<sup>st</sup>. The 2002 and 2005 winner Dave Mansbridge (Telford) was obviously glad that he'd accepted his invitation from organisers Amazing Feet RC since he added the 2006 title to his previous victories, running round in 48 minutes dead to win by 11 seconds.

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Another challenging multi-terrain is the well known Tough 10 race which takes place down on the coast at Weston-super-Mare. The 10.1-mile course uses sections of (closed) tarmac road along the seafront and coast, a section of the Promenade, woodland paths and steep trails within the 2-laps of Worlebury woods, a short stretch of the beach and even the Grand Pier. The official race description is "In parts it is flat and fast; in others there are short climbs and long downhill sections. Most compete in ordinary running shoes.", which makes it all sound rather gentle – it isn't, and there are certainly not more downhill parts than uphill ones! Present on Weston's (in)famous beach for the start of the event's 15<sup>th</sup> staging were 3 Stratford AC runners who were all experienced campaigners at this race. Malcolm Bowyer's timing chip was the first back onto the sea-front, going under the pier before doubling back for a one last effort along the beach, as he recorded an impressive 68:03 minutes which put him well up the field, finishing 55<sup>th</sup> out of the 982 finishers. The fact that Malcolm had gone quicker than 12 months previous was even more impressive given that he had run a very competitive XC race the day before. Second of the three amigos back on a cold and blustery, but dry and sunny, day was Allan Coldicott, whose 79:27 was good enough for 293<sup>rd</sup>, followed back by the ever-resilient Michael Oliver who had a fine run of 85:50 minutes to put him up into 509<sup>th</sup> place. At the top end of the placings Vito Graffagnono (56:22) beat last year's winner Rodri Jones into

2<sup>nd</sup> place, while Malindi Myers (68:46) retained her women's crown although she was a little slower than 2005.

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A 26-mile off-road race is not something that any runner would undertake lightly but Stratford AC's Pete Law probably has more stamina than sense, and having completed the Cotswolds Challenge on more than one occasion he knows what it takes to complete these types of event. The annual Belvoir Challenge was set up in 1990 to raise money for Harby Primary School, assisted by Vale Striders running club, and consists of either a 15 or 26-mile course through the Vale of Belvoir and Belvoir Escarpment in North-East Leicestershire. The routes both start and finish at Harby School following footpaths, byways, tracks, minor roads and, with the kind permission of the Duke of Rutland, go through the Belvoir Estate. There are checkpoints roughly every 5 miles providing free drinks and snacks and, since the event is well known for the homemade cakes provided, it is one of the few races where there's a danger of actually putting weight on! Pete started to struggle after a while with his usual calf problems and had to stop and stretch a few times, but he is not one to give in easily and the good news was that he managed the last 10 miles in one chunk. He therefore completed the course in 5 hours 42:00 minutes, which gave him a marvellous 69th place amongst the 177 doing the longer challenge – not bad for a 62-year old! The respective male and female winners were Paul Scholte (Peel Road Runners) with 3 hours 49:29 and Anne Wade (TRA) with 4:47:10.