

The 25th staging of the Shakespeare Marathon and Half-Marathon took place on Sunday and, despite the change of date and time, the usual large field and supportive crowds ensured that the event retained its reputation as one of the most popular races on the Midlands running calendar. With 701 finishers in the full event and 1,638 finishers in the half the Stratford Rotary Club did a great job to ensure that all the complex organisational issues were invisible to the competitors. The only drawback with the race has always been the 1 p.m. start time, compounded in recent years by very warm weather, but with a switch to a 10 a.m. kick off from Waterside even that slight irritation had disappeared. Stratford AC were well represented in their local race with a fine turnout of 4 marathoners and 25 half-marathoners, and the earlier start and kind weather conditions saw some highly impressive outings.

The marathon always has a large mental element to it, in that you have to blank out the pain that you know is coming, and when the course is 2-laps that psychological feature becomes even more important. All 4 of the Stratford runners doing both laps had done it before, not necessarily an advantage, with Karen Holmes (3 hours 47:14 minutes, 261st) annihilating her 4:32 from last year. Karen has improved enormously in the last year but, even with Mark Francis doing a fine job in keeping her company all the way round, she still surprised everyone with her great stamina and determination, and easily achieved her goal of getting under 4 hours. Mark himself was actually only entered in the half but, typically of someone who would do anything to help someone else, decided at the split point just to keep going and keep Karen company for the full distance! The other two, Wayne Vickers (3:05:34 28th) and Steve Donnelly (3:06:01, 35th), also produced stunning performances. Taking a death-or-glory attitude they ditched their pacemaker, Pete Plimmer, at the 1-mile mark, went through halfway in 1:28 and continued to run together until the 21-mile mark, at which point they were 12 minutes ahead of schedule! From the start of the Greenway at Long Marston Wayne started to slightly pull away from Steve, but it was only in the last 2 or 3 miles that the early pace really took its toll and they dropped down to over 8-minute miling. This magnificent achievement has confirmed that Wayne is in good shape for his forthcoming Ironman and that Steve definitely has a sub-3 hour marathon in him.

In the 1-lap half 2 members still with the effects of the London Marathon led the Stratford AC group back over the line on the Recreation Ground, as Malcolm Bowyer (1:25:20, 30th), also 'fresh' from his track debut the day before, and Phil Goodchild (1:27:04, 39th) persevered well. This duo stayed comfortably ahead of Keith Hawkes (1:27:40, 42nd) and Phil Howell (1:28:43, 48th), who is still below par with breathing difficulties. Kate Wright (1:31:33, 65th), Pete Plimmer (1:32:01, 68th) and Douglas Waddell (1:32:53, 75th), another trio of London veterans, were grouped together for a long

while before Kate used her extra speed to move away once the delightful Rumer Hill was out of the way. Another exceptional performance from Kate gained her a well deserved prize for finishing as 3rd female overall. Douglas just held off Steve Kirk (1:32:57, 77th), back in overcast Stratford after a week's training in sunny Lanzarote, with Rob Maull (1:36:53, 133rd) a little further back.

Michael Oliver (1:41:55, 244th) must go down as one of the most consistent Stratford AC members in recent years and proved once again that he will just keep going, edging out another consistent performer, Phil Marshall (1:43:50, 295th), who was within 40 seconds of his PB. Maxine Horsman (1:51:45, 555th) and Martin Ashworth (1:54:51, 670th) impressively took minutes off their 2005 times, but even they rather paled into insignificance against Simone Ryder (1:54:57, 675th) as her spectacular 12 months was reflected in a reduction of over 53 minutes on last year! There was then a bit of a gap before a 7-strong group of Stratford AC runners came in within a minute of each other, many of whom had been helping each other to get round. Leading this magnificent 7 were Sue Le Belleguy (1:57:58, 790th), making a very impressive half-marathon debut, Sarah Harman (1:58:12, 800th) and Graham Collins (1:58:14, 803rd), who has obviously been working hard as he improved by a massive 28 minutes on last year. Alice Crane (1:58:34, 816th) did really well to get under that 2-hour mark, while another debutant who can be extremely proud of their run was Naomi Whittaker (1:58:43, 825th). Pete Evans (1:58:44, 826th) did a fine job in pacemaking his wife Carolyn on her distance debut, and they narrowly edged out David Maundrell (1:58:46, 829th).

The final quartet of the 25 doing the shorter distance also saw some outstanding performances, and none more so than by Jane Mason (2:08:15, 1113th). Jane's increased training has seen her confidence and speed go through the roof in 2006, and this was underlined on Sunday as she saw a 27-minute drop in her time from last year. Behind Jane came Liza Dyer (2:11:22, 1181st), the ubiquitous John Butler (2:20:31, 1355th) and Catrin King (2:26:06, 1429th), whose improvement of 22 minutes over 2005 was almost Simone Ryder-esque! The event again turned out to be a great advert for the town, and so it was good to see so many from the local athletics club both taking part and running well in their own back yard.