

Last Saturday afternoon witnessed Stratford AC's senior men making their debut in a national final when they lined up at Sutton Park in Birmingham for the National 12-Stage Road Relays. As the slowest qualifying team the club were under no illusions about how difficult things were going to be, but were determined to run hard and use the standard of the other runners as something to work towards over the next few years. The first leg highlighted the fact that most of the country's best middle- and long-distance runners were present as Rob Minton, one of the club's top performers, ran a lightning quick 30:35 minutes for a tough, very blustery 5.5 miles and came in 62nd out of 66! Each of the dozen stages alternated between long and short so Joe Brocklehurst then ran the 3-mile leg 2 in 17:09, holding the club's position, before Phil Goodchild used all his London Marathon training to put in a fine 34:32 long leg. By the time Phil Howell (19:39), running despite a dodgy back, and Malcolm Bowyer (33:23) had run their legs the pattern was set with Stratford in 63rd and last place, behind Clayton-Le-Moors, after a couple more clubs had dropped out with incomplete teams. Keith Hawkes (18:16) managed to successfully hold onto last place before Steve Donnelly (33:17) nearly ran himself to a standstill in gaining almost 3 minutes on the now nearest club, Norfolk Gazelles. The two clubs then swapped places over the next couple of legs as team manager Paul Hawkins (19:01), having a great run on his 50th birthday, and Wayne Vickers (34:34) performed strongly, followed by a decisive run by Neil Hawkins as his 16:55 minute sprint opened up a 2 minute gap on the East Anglians, who were 22nd in the Southern qualifiers. Richard Dobedoe (33:10), and the increasingly quick Steve Kirk (18:33) both then increased this lead to over 4 minutes by the end, despite having to contend with driving hail and rain. Whilst avoiding last place may not seem particularly ambitious, given the illustrious company each runner's hard work really paid off in making it a successful and enjoyable day out. So, as Mo Farrah led Newham & Essex Beagles (4 hours 10:08) to victory, a time of 5:09:04 minutes and 60th place in the country sets out Stratford's benchmark for the future in this area.

The quality of Saturday's race was perhaps emphasised on Sunday morning when, despite having run hard the previous afternoon, Rob Minton and Steve Kirk excelled amongst a large entry for the Wright Hassell Regency 10K in Leamington. This race is only in its second year but has already become exceedingly popular and the entry limit of 1,250 was reached well in advance, with 13 Stratford AC runners amongst the 963 finishers. On a cool morning it wasn't difficult to see the race's attraction - a 10K multi-terrain course around the town's beautiful parks and streets giving some fine views, with the mostly flat route containing one short and sharp incline and including an all-weather bridleway. For Rob (34:20, 3rd) to put in such performances on consecutive days, especially given the close finish behind clear winner Emerson Combstock of Coventry Godiva (33:52), is testament to the hard work he puts into his training each week. Next back for the club were storming runs from Pete Evans (39:49, 42nd), in his first ever 10K, and a new PB for Steve Kirk (40:17, 46th) despite his valiant efforts of the day before. With Paul Johnson (41:49, 83rd), starting to gain speed again after injury problems, and first Stratford female Dawn Davies (44:40, 168th) having confidence boosting outings it was turning out to be a good morning for the club. A pair of club stalwarts were next as Allan Coldicott (45:02, 184th) and Michael Oliver (47:22, 251st) flew back to Victoria Park with Maxine

Horsman (48:09, 288th), getting stronger after a disrupted 12 months, in hot pursuit. Simone Ryder (52:16, 456th) continued to consolidate her rapid improvement ahead of the strong-finishing David Maundrell (53:50, 531st), also on his 10K debut, and Jane Mason (56:47, 655th). Jane's remarkable year continued with yet another massive 10K PB, after getting under the hour mark for the first time at Bourton and then taking another chunk off it last week (57:53) at her home town race in Totton, near Southampton. She is a classic example that hard work and thoughtful training really does pay dividends, both in the short- and long-term. John Butler (60:44, 761st) just failed to crack the hour, whilst Natasha Watkins (67:46, 893rd) took advantage of home ground knowledge to return to racing mode after an enforced break. Great Britain international Sue Harrison (34:28) was the first female back in this well organised and rather jolly event.

On a slightly less competitive note, the annual Stratford Family Fun Run will take place on the Recreation Ground on Sunday 30th April (11 a.m.). The event is for all ages and application forms can be obtained from stratfordac.co.uk or by ringing 01789 841489 or by turning up on the morning by 10:30 a.m., with a cost of £3 each or £6 per family. Afterwards children can swim free at the Leisure Centre, with a paying adult, on production of their running number.