

There are some races that competitors turn up to not really knowing what to expect, especially if the event's name gives very little away, but the Sodbury Slog, Hartshill Heartbreaker and Suicide Six certainly do not fall into this ambiguous category! What you know you are going to get is hills, mud and pain, and plenty of it. It takes a certain mentality to put oneself through these type of multi-terrain races, but some of the hardier souls of Stratford Athletic Club seem to do them with worrying regularity – how much character building does one person need?

The five members participating in the Sodbury Slog seemed almost disappointed that the light rainfall in south Gloucestershire leading up to the events meant that the mud wasn't as bad as the previous year, and that a problematic ditch had been removed from the route! The advantages though were there for all to see – stunning countryside, a memorable challenge and great training on a forgiving surface. The 9.5 country mile course starts and finishes from Chipping Sodbury School before leading runners onto the permanently boggy Sodbury Common, where strategically placed bales of hay ensure that swift progress is hindered. The first climb took the 997 runners onto the Cotswold Way, over the Roman encampment at Old Sodbury, then down through the woods into the grounds of Little Sodbury Manor. After several watery excursions, and through Horton village, the field find themselves back on Sodbury Common, delightfully wading through the River Frome.

With the race being filmed for regional BBC TV, the five Stratford members ensured that they all looked good as Kate Wright (1:15:42, 126th) led the troops back, finishing as 2nd O40 lady and 10th lady overall. Lesley Kirk's (1:21:39, 255th) fine performance put her into the 6th O40 lady slot, as she was paced perfectly by Pete Hill (1:21:40, 256th), rapidly regaining strength after a difficult year. Strong performances from the final Stratford pair - Sarah Odell (1:32:41, 460th) and Maxine Horsman (1:47:57, 748th) – merely highlighted that their natural habitat is rolling around in the mud. Richard Williams and Lisa Newing, both from Bristol University, were first back into the (separate) showers in 57:35 and 1:09:07 respectively.

The Hartshill Heartbreaker may take place in a slightly less obvious location – between Atherstone and Nuneaton – but provided just the same advantages as Chipping Sodbury, with the added benefit of some silverware for the Stratford contingent. Each year the numbers of entries gets slightly larger as word spreads, and this year's 17th staging of the 10-mile, hilly off-roader saw 265 runners turning up at Hartshill School for the start. A beautiful sunny morning saw some of the usual mud frosted over, but there was still plenty more around to make the course very treacherous in places, with the woods section especially slippery. Of the 4 Stratford AC members taking part Pete Hill (77:10, 77th) had a morning off from pacemaking duties to be first of the quartet back, and he flew round so fast that he took a fantastic 1st place in the male O60s category by over 4 minutes. A rare competitive outing from club chairman Ashley Sherren (79:40, 97th) saw him flourish in the male O50s class, and showed that even on limited training he can still finish well up the field, as he was followed home by wife Lynn Sherren (83:29, 126th). Lynn is another whose year has been blighted by injury, but her excellent 1st place in the female O50s was a just reward for her renown strength up hills and in difficult conditions. This just left a strong run from Chris Seeney (94:39, 187th) to finish things off, with Paul Andrew (Northbrook) and Nicola Clay (Stilton Striders) getting the individual honours, and Wootton Road Runners (men) and Rugby & Northampton (women) getting the team prizes.

The Suicide Six(ish) has in the past made the top 5 toughest races in the UK in Runner's World and, whilst this may possibly be slightly undeserved, the compulsory mud and hills are added to by a marvellous water crossing and a cruel set of steps near the end. The 10k multi-terrain race is basically 1 large lap of Baggeridge Country Park, in another unlikely location of Sedgley in the Black Country, and is well organised by Merry Hill Striders. On the same sunny Sunday morning as Hartshill, the two hardest men within Stratford AC – Paul Johnson and John Butler – took up this alternative challenge, and came away a little dirtier but with pride intact! With 645 finishers, Paul (50:00, 125th) did extremely well to power his round the course and through the field, while John (75:25, 609th) also stuck determinedly to the task in hand to keep up an even pace throughout. The local Tipton Harrier pair of Martin Williams (35:37) and Kate Hollis (45:50) finished as the first male and female respectively. Somehow the attraction of tarmac and concrete seems to grow a little after events like these!