

This coming Sunday sees the staging of one of this country's great sporting events, and the highlight of the UK road running calendar - the Flora London Marathon. Every one of the tens of thousands of participants will have a very personal reason for competing, whilst at the same time raising millions of pounds for good causes each year, and amongst the starters in Greenwich will be a sizeable contingent from Stratford AC. The last couple of months have seen the number of warm-up races increasing rapidly and can often be used a guide to the form of the runners and riders.

The trails of the Forest of Dean may not resemble the streets of London too closely, but does give competitors a stiff test on an undulating course in a beautiful location, and at the same time doesn't give the knees and ankles quite such a hammering. It is good to see that Peter Plimmer (1:33:28, 92<sup>nd</sup>) isn't letting such minor things as his forthcoming wedding get in the way of the important things in life, and it was obvious that his fitness and strength has steadily improved throughout the marathon training period. Mark Francis (1:37:21, 144<sup>th</sup>) produced a good performance despite the remains of a bad cold, ahead of the still improving Geoff Hillman (1:45:10, 269<sup>th</sup>) and Jason Duffey (1:46:05, 295<sup>th</sup>), in sadly what was his last race as a Stratford member in the short-term at least. Tony Hunt (1:47:42, 347<sup>th</sup>) will no doubt be demonstrating his renowned stamina on Sunday, and this proved a very useful asset on a tough course such as this. Next back for Stratford, on a beautiful day that tempted runners out of their winter leggings, was Karen Holmes (1:49:49, 400<sup>th</sup>), who was driven on to a fine run by the worry of being stalked by Allan Coldicott (1:49:50, 401<sup>st</sup>). Michael Oliver (1:51:10, 420<sup>th</sup>) and Maxine Horsman (1:53:06, 461<sup>st</sup>) both battled away well to finish in the top half of the 992-strong field, followed by two of the club's most prolific racers currently - Jane Mason (2:20:25, 881<sup>st</sup>) and John Butler (2:29:11, 935<sup>th</sup>).

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The Ashby 20 event over in Leicestershire probably replicates Sunday's conditions more accurately, since it's longer and all on-road, but contains more hills than London, is 2-laps rather than one and is still very much a rural race. Kate Wright has proved again and again over the last 2 years how strong she is at various distances, and a time of 2:26:46 at Ashby should give her enormous confidence going into the weekend. That put her 119<sup>th</sup> out of a total of 614 finishers and, with Kate's stomach problems in longer races hopefully solved, everything points to a successful journey to the capital.

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One of the most difficult 20-milers around is the Rhayader Round The Lakes race down in deepest Wales. The hills and wind will hamper the participants physically but tough and isolated races like this are also an ideal exercise in building mental strength, which is such an important aspect of marathon running. One Stratford AC member who has no problem with that aspect is Pete Law, and he produced a steady run of 3:28:13 to put him 323<sup>rd</sup> and well up in his O60 age category. As long as his calves don't start giving him problems again Pete can look forward to a successful trip down south on Sunday.

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The Fleet Half-Marathon is one of the flattest, fastest and best organised pre-London events, and with 2,466 finishers is certainly one of the largest. Lesley Kirk (1:34:21, 415<sup>th</sup>) has an unnerving knack of being able to peak at exactly the right time, and she looks to have done it again as her excellent run meant that she missed out on a PB by only 5 seconds, but did claim the Jenny Green's club female O45 record for the distance. She was also a very impressive 4<sup>th</sup> F45 on the day. It's a pity that her husband Steve (1:28:01, 215<sup>th</sup>) won't be there on the big day as he just continues to improve all the time. Although the conditions may have been in his favour – dry and sunny with a cool breeze – Steve ran superbly to smash that 1:30 mark for the first time.

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The Bath Half Marathon was another enormous, flat and fast warm-up race to take place on the same Sunday as Fleet, with 5,993 runners crossing the finishing line in this picturesque city. Keith Hawkes (1:30:20, 409<sup>th</sup>) used the race to try and get some fitness back after injury, but will still be deferring his London place until 2007.

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Peter Plimmer (2:58:11, 69<sup>th</sup>) and Lesley Kirk (2:59:52, 76<sup>th</sup>) joined forces with 160 other lucky contestants to take part in another long and difficult multi-terrain event – Milford 21. The icy tracks of Cannock Chase, combined with some exhausting switchback hills, proved challenging to both Stratford members as first Lesley and then Pete went through bad patches. With the race close to being cancelled as the tracks were so slippery in places it is not surprising that the pair were both well down on their 2005 times, but the important thing is that they battled on right to the end.

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The Banbury 15 is a relatively local test for those looking to test themselves over a longer distance. There were 6 Stratford members present who will be doing the 26.2 miles and they all must have been pleased with their performances on a bitterly cold morning at a far from easy course – Malcolm Bowyer (1:40:18, 29<sup>th</sup>), Phil Goodchild (1:42:30, 38<sup>th</sup>), Kate Wright (1:44:22, 49<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> lady), Paul Hawkins (1:49:34, 74<sup>th</sup>), Lesley Kirk (1:51:37, 79<sup>th</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup> F45) and Sarah Odell (2:03:03, 168<sup>th</sup>). There were 3 non-London members there to keep them company – Steve Kirk (1:51:05, 77<sup>th</sup>), a rare outing from Tony Jackson (1:51:51, 81<sup>st</sup>) and a not so rare outing from John Butler (2:43:12) – as well as 5 juniors in the earlier races. Sam Taylor (14:16, 17<sup>th</sup>), Georgie Evans (19:12, 69<sup>th</sup>) and Hannah Taylor (19:12, 70<sup>th</sup>) took part in the 2-mile fun run, whilst Ben Taylor (aged 7) was 32<sup>nd</sup> and the remarkable Katie Taylor (on crutches) was second to last in the 1-mile fun run for the under-14s. It sounds like they could be future London Marathon contenders with that sort of spirit!

Best wishes go out to all competitors on Sunday morning as they rise to meet their personal challenges.