

When the organisers of a race describe it as intended 'for athletes who are ready for a true challenge', it pays to take notice. In fact, it pays to look for another race to enter but both Pete Evans and Steve Kirk were too stubborn to change their minds and so made the long trip up to Pugneys Country Park, Wakefield earlier this month for the British Triathlon National Age Group Olympic Distance Championships.

This was the first time either of the Stratford AC athletes had entered this prestigious event and although the early Sunday morning start meant registration and bike racking in transition on the Saturday afternoon, it did give them a chance to 'recce' the bike course and make some final preparations. With 24km of climbing on the 40km route, out through Denby Dale and looping back along bumpy minor roads, suddenly the 'true challenge' of the race they would face the next day was becoming apparent.

The extremely hot weather of the last few weeks meant the early start was very welcome and the warm water of Pugneys Country Park made the 1500m swim almost pleasurable with Pete and Steve recording almost identical times. On the bike it was a different story as Pete's strength, technique and fancy tri-specific bike gave him a 5-minute lead that he extended to almost 7 minutes on the flat 4-lap 10km run course. Pete finished in 2 hours 33:50 minutes (31:27 / 1:17:11 / 45:10) in 297th overall position out of the 605 finishers (47th in his age group), while Steve just missed the 2 hour 40 minute barrier in 2:40:25 (31:26 / 1:22:08 / 46:50) to finish in 379th position (67th in his age group). It was a small consolation that the winner Steven Harrison (FVS Tri) was unable to break the 2 hour barrier although there was nothing shabby about his time of 2 hours 4:32 minutes (21:26 / 1:07:22s / 35:42). So, clearly not an event for achieving personal best times but a satisfying challenge just as the organisers had promised.

Three more hardy Stratford AC members took part in the 6th staging of the Wyre Forest Half Marathon, over near Bewdley in Worcestershire, and all of the trio can be very happy with their efforts. The race is run entirely in the picturesque forest, and even with the cooler weather conditions for this year's event it is still one of the hardest half-marathons in the areas. Some overnight rain had left some surface mud on the undulating route, but the more favourable temperatures were reflected in a host of lower times than in previous years and culminated in a number of course records.

One of these category records was in the ladies 40+ group where Stratford's Kate Wright produced a stunning return to form and lowered her own record from 2005. Kate recorded a time of 1 hour 33:28 minutes, a fine performance over this challenging course, which put her as 4th female and 42nd overall. After having to walk part of the final difficult hill last year Mark Francis started off more cautiously this time and was rewarded with a quicker time than last year, 1:38:57, 7th place in the male over-45s and 68th place overall. The third of the Stratford runners back to the finish at the Visitors Centre was Paul Johnson, who underlined his growing fitness with a confident run of 1:41:15; more than good enough to give him 79th place amongst the total of 248 finishers. In line with the quicker times this year was a new course record by nearly 2 minutes from Tom Kenderdine (Kidderminster & Stourport) with 1:13:49, and an excellent 1:28:59 from the ladies winner Clare Grice (Birchfield Harriers).

Also chasing each other along woodland trails were Stratford runners Michael Oliver and Jane Mason as they took part in the annual New Forest 10 race down in Hampshire. As with the Wyre Forest event it is the setting that really helps make this 10-mile race something special, and with 769 finishers obviously many other people agree. Michael was the first of the happy couple over the line in a time of 1 hour 19:34 minutes for 273rd place, with Jane coming in at 1:42:34 for 682nd.