

These are extremely positive times for each of the individual cross-country sections at Stratford Athletics Club, and the senior women were the latest to put in a ground-breaking performance. The ladies are in the same position as the juniors, in that they are enjoying their best ever season, while the senior men are well placed for promotion after last winter's relegation disappointments. In the second fixture of the Midland Women's XC League, at Droitwich near Worcester, the Stratford women were placed a fantastic 10th –this is out of the whole region since the league is not divisionalised.

As with all of these things the first priority is just to get bodies out there competing, and with a much higher level of commitment this year from within the club it was possible to put out a team of 8. Since all 8 either scored for the senior or veterans teams, or pushed the scorers for other senior teams down the field, the success proved to be a real team effort. With the men's team watching on before their race over the same course, it did not escape their notice that a rather deep and muddy ditch towards the end of each lap was causing the runners a lot of problems.

Kate Wright (27:49, 36th) ran a beautifully paced race to lead the team home, but only 8 seconds ahead of an incredibly gutsy XC debut from Debbie Cooper (27:57, 39th) who set off hard and then used all her strength to hang on in there. Dawn Davies (28:32, 48th) had the belief from her great run in the first fixture to confidently run her own race, complete with storming finish, while the ever-consistent Lesley Kirk (29:29, 60th) worked her way through the field behind Dawn. The good news that Lynn Sherren (30:53, 79th), fifth back for the team, finally completed a race without having to stop with calf problems was slightly tempered by the fact that she had to stop anyway to do her laces up! Tracey Bailey (31:39, 84th), getting stronger all the time after an injury disrupted year, and Sarah Odell (32:02, 89th) have proved to be enthusiastic XC runners in the last couple of seasons, and they will no doubt be an inspiration to newcomer Annabel Richardson (39:04, 125th), who battled right to the end even though she found her second XC race a lot harder than her first.

This left the team in 10th place, with a total of 123 points, behind winners Loughborough Students but well ahead of such notable scalps as Coventry Godiva and Leamington, and 3rd in the veterans table behind Wolverhampton & Bilston. Optimism is now justifiably high for the third meeting in Coventry in January.

December sees a spate of seasonally related races and one of the most popular and enduring in the region took place last week. Santa himself would have been impressed to see 715 competitors line-up for the start of the 10-mile Christmas Pudding Run, staged over in Bloxwich (Walsall) and well organised by Sneyd Striders. On a thoroughly miserable Sunday morning it was encouraging to see that half-a-dozen of these were from Stratford AC, and not only were they rewarded with a Christmas pudding at the finish, but it was actually bigger than the ones the previous year! The downside was that they really had to earn it, especially in the second-half of the race where they were heading straight into the wind and rain, as well as going up and down one or two hills. Starting off from under the M6 may not be everyone's idea of a classic opening, but the 1-lap race soon pans out into a pleasant rural setting, before turning back to return to Sneyd School.

Kate Wright (65:21, 69th) put in another storming performance to win the female O40 prize, lowering her time of last year by over a minute in much worse running conditions. Behind Kate was John Turner (76:13, 242nd), joyfully able to start

competing again after heart problems, and Sarah Odell (78:14, 291st). Michael Oliver (79:27, 332nd) returned to racing ways with a solid run, with Annabel Richardson's (91:39, 554th) excellent outing taking minutes of her previous time here to nearly PB, and achieving her target of getting as close to partner Emerson Mayes (76:22, 244th) as possible. Wrapping up proceedings for Stratford was the iconic John Butler (100:48, 660th), while an extremely tight finish saw M. Cadman (Tipton) snatch victory in 54:11 minutes and Nikki Archer (Vale Royal AC) coast home in an impressive 57:29. As far as training goes it was the perfect preparation for Christmas: lots of running and lots of food!

Stratford AC's annual winter road race, Not The Roman IX, is looming once more for those who fancy a manageable challenge in January. The 12K event takes place on Sunday 28th, starting from just outside Tiddington and taking in the Banbury Road, Loxley and the Loxley Road before finishing at the NFU in Knight's Lane. Glorious weather and a completely flat course (apart from the hills) are guaranteed, and entry forms can be obtained from either www.stratfordac.co.uk or the Runners World website, or by phoning 01789 841489. The 700-entry limit has been reached well before race day for the last few years.