

Stratford AC's senior men's cross-country team got exactly what they deserved in the second half of the season, as they were relegated by the narrowest of margins from Division 3 of the Birmingham League. Considering the potential squad is probably as strong as the club has ever had, and should really be challenging for promotion, this proved to be quite an achievement. Whilst injuries hit hard this winter, and some unavailabilities are always inevitable, team manager Paul Hawkins often found himself up against apathy and a preference for individual road glory. The club only really asks its athletes to compete 4 times a year, or 8 for those also disposed towards track and field, yet it has become very rare for more than 2 of its top 10 runners to be competing in any race. Despite the fact that those who did race have really excelled this year, the Birmingham XC League is just so competitive that only one outcome is likely given those odds.

The third, and penultimate, round of fixtures took place over at Malvern and for the second consecutive meeting the team finished in a respectable 8th position in the 13-club division, which was enough to pull them out of the relegation spots. Nuneaton, who were 2 points ahead of Stratford going into that race, put in a poor performance and finished 168 points adrift of them, leaving the club with their fate in their own hands for February's final race. The 4-lap race took place on Malvern Common, with an impressive backdrop of the snow-covered Malvern Hills directly behind, in bitterly cold conditions with blustery snow showers for the runners to contend with.

Rob Minton (9th) was returning to familiar territory and whether or not local knowledge played a part he paced himself perfectly for a strong finish and a top10 place again. Behind Rob came Neil Hawkins (23rd), who showed good mental strength as he hung on in there during his difficult middle laps, and Keith Hawkes (38th) as the third counter followed by Richard Dobedoe (60th) just behind; Richard finding the going tough in his first cross-country race of the season. The final two 'A' team scorers both made a massive difference to the club's overall position by having storming runs and giving the club a total of 271 points; the season's best. Wayne Vickers (69th) invariably excels in tough conditions, since strength and a complete disregard for the sensible are required in equal measure, and 10 seconds behind Wayne was Malcolm Bowyer. Ashley Sherren (85th) showed that there's still life left in the old legs yet, and certainly a competitive spirit left in his heart, as he beat off the challenge of the returning Phil Goodchild by 1 place and 1 second in the final tough uphill straight. Paul Hawkins (88th) was just behind this battling pair with one of the true stalwarts of the club, Pete Walton (108th), belying his age and the conditions to give the 'B' team their 4th counter. Steve Kirk (117th) continued to slip and slide his way around, while the increasingly reliable Phil Marshall (121st), competing in his first race as an over-50, completed the scoring for the 'B' team (605 points) giving them a well-deserved 4th place in that competition.

So, it was onto Kingshurst for the deciding fixture. To their credit Nuneaton put out by far their strongest team of the season, although even they must have been resigned to being relegated. On an imaginative 1-small lap, 2 large-lap course, organised by Centurion RR, the recent lack of rain had made the going underfoot very firm, and occasionally rutted, suiting some more than others.

First back for Stratford again was Rob Minton (5th) with a stunning performance and a season's best, less than a minute behind the winner and also giving Rob 5th place in the individual season's standings – no mean feat at this level. To see him competing in

Division 4 next year will be intensely disappointing. With a whole raft of Stratford's runners then missing the next counters were the highly consistent Malcolm Bowyer (66th), followed by a fine battle between Mark Francis (85th), Paul Hawkins (87th) and Steve Baker (90th). The final scoring runner for Stratford was Ashley Sherren (103rd), who had lap-counting problems on the 2-circuit race, giving the club a total for the afternoon of 436 points and 1351 for the season, compared to Nuneaton's 265 and 1346 equivalents. One of the few bright spots in an uninspiring season has been the return of Brian Thornett (106th) and he again showed his strength on the hilly sections, followed back by a slightly more sure-footed Steve Kirk (111th). Tony Jackson (128th) is typical of those that do compete, as he ignored recent heart scares, cardiograms and angiograms to ease round and ensure that at worst there would be a full complement of Stratford runners finishing, with Luke Watkins (142nd) making an excellent senior XC debut in the Birmingham League.

Although the margin of relegation was a wafer-thin 5 points, tempting everyone concerned to think where and when they could have improved, the real issue is one for those absent to ponder on. Life in Division 4 next year will not be at all easy but hopefully this setback will act as a catalyst for a more positive attitude and see the club return to its winning ways of recent years.