

There was a quiet determination amongst Stratford AC's senior men that during this winter they would erase the bitter memories of last season's relegation to Division 4 of the Birmingham Cross-Country League, and they made an impressive start by comfortably winning the first of the four fixtures. With the senior ladies team running first at the same venue in the Midlands Women's CC League, and finishing in an extremely respectable mid-table slot, and the men's B team also topping their division it was a highly satisfying start to the senior season for the club.

The Senneley's Park (south-west Birmingham) meeting is a large one, with a series of junior races followed by the senior women and finally all the senior men's divisions come together with some high-quality UKA Challenge competitors. This fine venue thankfully decided to keep its exciting stream crossing, despite rumblings from some elite athletes wary of injury, although the course redesign did mean only one dip for the women in their 2-lap 6k race and two for the males for their 10k 3-lapper, resulting in slightly quicker times than in recent years.

The 5 Stratford ladies generally performed at the top end of expectations and were placed a terrific 13<sup>th</sup> out of the 24 clubs with complete teams; this is a non-divisionalised league covering the whole of the Midlands. Dawn Davies' (29:19, 63<sup>rd</sup>) marvellous run emphasised her real potential and buried any negative thoughts from last year's meeting, and she was backed up by a strong showing from Lesley Kirk (30:08, 76<sup>th</sup>) and an under-par one from Yvonne Caswell (31:02, 91<sup>st</sup>). Two fine XC debuts completed the team with Sarah Bland (34:02, 120<sup>th</sup>), who lost a lot of places by kindly staying with a stricken competitor unlike assistance arrived, and Natasha Watkins (43:28, 161<sup>st</sup>) seemingly enjoying the muddy experience!

Last season's problems for the men stemmed from a combination of injuries and unavailabilities, so it was a big boost to see high levels of commitment from the membership and a squad of 17 turning out. Joe Brocklehurst (35:26, 3<sup>rd</sup>) just carried on from where he left off on the track with a stunning run, going out strongly from the start, while Neil Hawkins (37:47, 6<sup>th</sup>) and Rob Minton (38:03, 8<sup>th</sup>) dragged each other along extremely well, especially given their limited racing recently. Keith Hawkes (40:47, 25<sup>th</sup>) managed to find another gear (reverse) coming into the home straight and lost a number of valuable places, and he was followed back by ironman Wayne Vickers (41:16, 30<sup>th</sup>) and veteran Tony Jackson (43:29, 48<sup>th</sup>). Wayne would have probably preferred the mudbath of 2 years ago to show his strength, but the firmer conditions suited Tony's larger frame, and his excellent run was a reflection of the dedicated training he puts in. The B team, packing extremely well with only 23 places covering the six counters, were led home by team manager Paul Hawkins (43:44, 50<sup>th</sup>) and Roger Wilson (44:04, 54<sup>th</sup>), a valuable addition for this season. Mark Francis (44:11, 57<sup>th</sup>) pushed Roger all the way despite having just finished his post round, while Jason Harman's (44:26, 61<sup>st</sup>) senior XC debut was a highly promising one. Ashley Sherren (44:51, 69<sup>th</sup>) worked his way through the field with his usual strong second-half, and Steve Kirk (45:04, 72<sup>nd</sup>) reaped the benefits of finally getting some spikes to complete the B team. Every one of the B team pushed out the scores for 7 of the other A teams, emphasising how each place counts. The club were just one short of having a C team for the first time ever, and Pete Hill (45:04, 73<sup>rd</sup>) was the first of the five across the line. The remarkable Brian Thornett (46:13, 86<sup>th</sup>) will become stronger again with each race he gets under his belt, and he was just ahead of a rare outing from Dave Wolstencroft (47:41, 104<sup>th</sup>). Phil Marshall (49:06, 116<sup>th</sup>) did well testing out his dodgy achilles, which just left Luke Watkins (50:04, 122<sup>nd</sup>) to wrap up proceedings.

This left Stratford on top of the 15-team division, over 40 place points ahead of Trentham and Stafford, while the B team's total of 363 sees them 75 points ahead of Bournville and would have been good enough to beat 6 A teams! Some quick calculations show that the squad would have finished a comfortable 5<sup>th</sup> place in Division 3, which is both pleasing and frustrating, and in Division 2 they would have tied with Kenilworth on exactly 343 points each! Droitwich in December sees the next fixture for both the males and females, with all the teams knowing that this promising start has to be consolidated.

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Stratford AC's Roger Wilson made a glorious international debut on Saturday, as he took individual bronze and team gold when England won the O65 age category at the British & Irish Veterans' Cross Country International at Falkirk. With torrential rain on the Friday and an extremely painful foot that had stopped him training the omens were not good for him, but a beautiful day dawned and gritting his teeth Roger just ran through the pain barrier to great effect. The course was a 2-lap, 6k-route around a picturesque and undulating parkland course, and although Roger was in agony on the second lap he stayed very disciplined to finish in a fantastic third place. England were 1-2-3 in the race, and with Roger having beaten both those ahead of him this year he is already looking forward to Belfast in 2007 and hopefully an injury-free build-up.