

Amsterdam is the annual venue for one of the top half-dozen big city marathons in the world, so if you're going to set a new personal best and get under that magical 3-hour mark for the first time then this is probably as good a place as any to do it. Stratford AC's Steve Donnelly did just that as he produced a perfectly paced race to finish the 26.2 mile course in a fantastic time of 2 hours 57:12 minutes. Having gained experience of running abroad by doing the Berlin equivalent last autumn, and having brought his PB down significantly with each marathon appearance, Steve more than justified all those difficult pre-race expectations on him. The route is very flat, in order to attract the world's best, and the cool and cloudy weather conditions were ideal, but at no time did he struggle and his first thought as he crossed the line was that he could go quicker still!

The course starts and finishes with half a lap in the 1928 Olympic Stadium and includes many of the city's highlights, such as the nature reserves on both sides of the river Amstel, the Maritime Museum, the historic canals, Rijksmuseum and the attractive Vondelpark which features twice on the route. With the Dutch city's roads not quite as wide as Berlin's there was quite a congested start, especially when a couple of sharp turns were encountered, but Steve's 10k times of 42:20, 41:27, 42:07 and 42:33 highlight just how much in control he felt throughout. With the kilometre markers not altogether obvious, and 22,000 other runners around him, the first one that he saw was the 10k marker making pacing even more difficult. With 6 of the 42k to go the first signs of tiredness started to set in, but this just prompted Steve to pick the pace up as he aimed for his 2:55 pre-race target. Even though he was slightly outside this time his marvellous achievement put him into 329<sup>th</sup> place overall, and 65<sup>th</sup> in his M40 age category, as Kenyans dominated the podiums as expected.

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Provincial marathons can be a different proposition altogether, with the reduction in support balanced up by being unhindered and able to concentrate on your own race. Two Stratford runners, both noted for their ultra-running abilities, took part in events in Cardiff and Leicester and showed their strength. Kim Johnston took the Welsh option and will be pleased with getting under the 4-hour mark as he recorded 3 hours 59:42 minutes, which placed him 706<sup>th</sup> out of the 1,246 finishers and 83<sup>rd</sup> in his M45-49 age group. Cardiff probably has the potential to be a world-class event with a flat course, good support and a 2-lap route that includes both urban and parkland, the Bay and the Castle and a finish in the Millennium Stadium. Tessa Faure, a recent stalwart of Stratford AC's long Sunday morning runs, has remarkable stamina and will probably have looked upon the Leicester Marathon as a bit too much of a sprint! Despite this an excellent outing saw Tessa take 68<sup>th</sup> place, out of 146, in a time of 3 hours 47:09 minutes. This was a fine result on a far from flat, rural course that starts and finishes just outside Desford, and the fact that she was 6<sup>th</sup> lady emphasises the quality of her run. Mike Johnson of Kenilworth Runners not only won the event in his first marathon, but also came close to recording a course record with his 2:36:40!

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The much hailed and publicised Xterra Off Road Triathlon made its British debut in the Vale of Neath in South Wales. A busy weekend of running and cycling events over the two days was put on – on Saturday there was the choice of 75km or 35km on a mountain bike, and 10 km or half-marathon on your feet. On Sunday there was a Sprint Triathlon (750m swim, 17km bike and 5km run) or the full works (1500m

swim, 34km bike and 10km run). For those brave or stupid enough to want to do both days there was The Slam (all the short distances) or the Grand Slam (all the long distances). Two extremely hardy Stratford AC triathletes took their chances with Debbie Cooper doing the Slam and Sarah Bland the Sprint Tri. Unfortunately for the organisers the Welsh weather got the upper hand though, with gale force winds and rain lashing the site throughout Friday and Saturday and destroying the campsite. The cycling still went ahead and Debbie produced great form to win the ladies race, but the running events had to be cancelled due to the weather in the afternoon. The Sunday weather improved, but again the organisers were forced to cancel the swim as the emergency vehicles couldn't get there so they turned the event into a duathlon - 2.5km run, 17km bike, 2.5km run. This produced a pair of victories for Stratford AC – Debbie pulled off a superb race to take the 1<sup>st</sup> female slot, and also an impressive 18<sup>th</sup> overall out of 110 starters, whilst Sarah powered through to a fantastic win in the O40 ladies section. Debbie thus pulled off the Ladies Slam too, coming 2<sup>nd</sup> overall in the process!