

Along with leaves falling off trees and the clocks going back, one of the traditional ways of spotting the change of seasons is the Midlands Road Relays, which took place on Saturday afternoon at Sutton Park in Birmingham. This high-quality event is littered with international runners past and present, and Stratford Athletic Club's men and women took their place on the start line alongside this illustrious company. While in the short-term the club are unlikely to figure at the sharp end, it is both good experience for those involved and also important for the club to be represented at these events.

The 4-strong women's team set the ball rolling with a series of encouraging performances, as debutant Sarah Odell (19:33) and an under the weather Lesley Kirk (18:50) gave them a steady start on their approximately 2.5-mile legs. Natasha Watkins (26:33) then kept the good work going before a fine run from Dawn Davies (18:45) pulled the team up by 5 places on the last leg. This gave the Stratford ladies an overall time of 1 hour 23:41 minutes and 43<sup>rd</sup> place out of the 51 clubs who managed to get complete teams around, and the 61 who started. Charnwood AC took the title with Birchfield in second place, 18 seconds behind.

On a lovely afternoon for running the men then took to the paths, following the same undulating anti-clockwise route as the ladies but adding a bit on to make each of their 6 legs up to roughly 3.5 miles. Luke Watkins (27:09) took on the notoriously difficult first leg, passing over to Steve Kirk (24:43) whose body still just about remembered what to do after 3 weeks holiday! A typically impressive run from Rob Minton (20:12) then dragged the boys up a massive 11 places, with another tanned holiday-returnee, Paul Hawkins (24:30), gaining 2 more positions. Ironman Wayne Vickers (22:34) then showed he's got a bit of speed as well as a lot of stamina, before the ever-reliable Malcolm Bowyer (23:38) overtook another 3 clubs on the final stretch. Their very respectable overall time of 2 hours 22:46 minutes gave the Stratford males the 69<sup>th</sup> slot amongst the 89 finishers, and the 101 teams who started off. Tipton Harriers opened up a 30-second lead on leg 5 and kept that intact all the way round the last lap to finish ahead of Bristol and OWLS from Leicestershire.

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The UK boom in triathlon shows no sign of slowing down and a new sprint race has just made its debut on the streets of Warwick, with Stratford AC's Debbie Cooper there to judge it. To encourage newcomers to the sport to participate there was a shorter version than the main sprint event and also a chance for the youngsters to try their hand but Debbie, being an experienced triathlete, opted for the longer distances. The event was based at Warwick Boys School with the 400m swim in their pool, the 2-lap 5km run on the paths and fields within their grounds and the 20km cycle ride followed the Myton Road, Banbury Road, over the M40, round a small island, back down the same road to Europa Way, down to Tachbrook retail park and then along the Myton Road and back to transition. On a beautifully warm Sunday morning Debbie put in a great performance to come 17<sup>th</sup> overall out of the 144 finishers, being placed 3<sup>rd</sup> lady. She showed just how strong her cycling is by completing the bike leg in 36:17 minutes – 13<sup>th</sup> fastest overall and almost 2 minutes quicker than the next fastest lady – whilst her swim time was 7:42 minutes and run time 20:51 minutes. Debbie's total time of 1 hour 4:50 minutes was only 1 second behind the second-placed female, which was even more annoying given Debbie's slightly dodgy transitions, with Andrew Davies (56:41) and Zoe Hanson (1:03:19) taking the overall honours.

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As the track and field season fades over the horizon for another year some of the Stratford AC runners attended a number of high-quality open meetings around the country to test themselves out. In a warm and sunny Stretford (Manchester) Neil Hawkins ran the BMC Gold Standard 800m A race, running 1:53:09 for a new club record and 7<sup>th</sup> place despite struggling on the second lap. Four days later Joe Brocklehurst joined Neil in a wet and windy Cardiff where Joe had a great win in the D race, taking the lead with 200m to go and holding off a Scottish challenger for 1:55:51. In contrast, a very chesty Neil struggled in the C race and almost jogged in to record 2:00:27. Onto Worcester and wins for Stratford athletes in 3 of the 4 events. In the 400m Neil Hawkins was 1<sup>st</sup> in 50:5, Joe Brocklehurst 3<sup>rd</sup> in 52:3 and decathlete Joe Donaghue 5<sup>th</sup> with 53:9, with the same trio getting 1<sup>st</sup> (23:5), 4<sup>th</sup> (25:1) and 6<sup>th</sup> (25:6) respectively in the 200m on a blustery day. Joe Brocklehurst then won a very competitive 800m in 1:58:6 despite his previous races, with coach Paul Hawkins breaking the club's winning sequence by coming 4<sup>th</sup> in the B 1500m in 5:17:1. Finally onto a windy Tamworth with Neil Hawkins and Joe Brocklehurst again starring in the 400m. In heat 3 Neil won easing down, while Joe qualified for the final as fastest loser after recording a fine PB of 51:42, while in the final Neil won in 50:5 but Joe tied up in the fairly strong wind and was 4<sup>th</sup> in 53:39.