

A record turnout of 19 senior men from Stratford AC saw their cross-country team take another giant leap towards promotion from Division 4 of the Birmingham Cross Country League. Finishing second on the day left the squad remaining well clear of Bourneville at the top at the halfway point, and with a fantastic individual win by Joe Brocklehurst and the B team storming to another impressive win the fixture could not have gone much better.

Watching the Stratford ladies perform so well beforehand around the Droitwich course obviously inspired the men's team, and none more so than Joe (39:16, 1st). Setting off strongly he whittled down the leading group and eventually broke the Stafford runner, who had beaten him by 45 seconds in winning the first meeting, by 4 seconds with a fast finish. With Neil Hawkins out injured it was important that Rob Minton (41:02, 7th) produced another good performance and as usual he did not disappoint, narrowly failing to catch the 6th placed runner who continually seemed intent on taking his own (slightly shorter) route. A big bonus was that Steve Donnelly (44:45, 27th) is starting to reproduce his road form on the grass, although he was marginally edged out in a sprint finish, and he came in just ahead of Malcolm Bowyer (45:04, 32nd), who was making his seasonal debut. Nine seconds later Wayne Vickers (45:13, 34th) also crossed the line, with Keith Hawkes (45:33, 38th) completing the A team scoring after an interesting race that included a close shave with the canal and losing a shoe on the first lap in the treacherous ditch.

The next pair back for Stratford, Paul Johnson (46:13, 45th) and Joe Donaghue (46:34, 49th), are both looking far stronger off-road these days, and they were closely followed home in a tightly packed B team by Lord Howell (47:56, 56th) and Mark Francis (48:00, 57th). The six B counters were completed by Tony Jackson (48:24, 61st) and another extremely impressive showing from youngster Jason Harman (48:44, 65th), who now occupies second place overall in the divisional junior placings.

It is unusual for runners of the quality of Pete Hill (48:58, 69th) and Steve Kirk (48:58, 70th) not to even make the B team, but they had their own private battle to spur them on and in doing so pushed the scorers of all but two other A teams down the field.

This contest is rapidly moving into the 'Ali v Frazier' classic category as remarkably the pair also got the same times in the first fixture, with Steve just edging it that time. The seemingly eternal youth of Brian Thornett (49:35, 79th) carried him through another terrific performance, while Dave Wolstencroft (50:22, 86th) did something never achieved before in the club's history – he fitted a 10K XC race into his work lunch hour! Luke Watkins (53:59, 109th) and Phil Marshall (53:59, 110th) provided the most spectacular finish of the afternoon, whilst seeing John Turner (54:47, 112th) returning to serious racing again was another large plus point on a day of positives.

The A team's 139 points may have been beaten on the day by Bourneville's 121 but Stratford still have an overall lead of 38 points on them, and the B team's total of 333 points put them comfortably ahead of the same club both for this race and for the season. Amongst the leading individuals after 2 meetings, as well having Jason Harman in the juniors Stratford have Joe Brocklehurst in 2nd place and Rob Minton in equal 5th place in the senior rankings. These impressive statistics reflect some fine individual performances as well as an excellent team spirit, and Birmingham's Cofton Park in January will hopefully continue to witness this lack of complacency and healthy work ethic.

The final standings in the Warwickshire Road Race League have finally been released, and whilst Stratford AC slipped down the rankings from their fine year in 2005 it was still a respectable performance. From an individual point of view Kate Wright was the only name to appear, reflecting irregular appearances in the 8-race series from most Stratford runners, although the club finished mid-table in all the team standings: 10th (out of 16) in the senior men, 7th (out of 16) in the senior women, 7th (out of 16) in the veteran males and 8th (out of 15) in the veteran females. Kate's fine form meant that she finished 15th in the senior female rankings, and 10th in the veterans, even though she only completed 4 counting races rather than 5 - if she had run one more she would have certainly finished in the top 3 of the seniors and top 2 of the veterans.