

Stratford AC's senior men's track and field team pulled off a fantastic performance in their final meeting of the season to clinch the Midlands' Men's League Division 3 title against all odds. Lying in 3<sup>rd</sup> place at the halfway stage of the season the club won the next 2 meetings to rise from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 1<sup>st</sup>, win their first ever title and gain promotion to Division 2. Nothing is ever simple with track and field though and there was a slightly subdued end to the afternoon as the team were unsure, for a number of reasons, as to whether they had done enough to even go up let alone top the table. As things stood Birchfield Harriers pushed Stratford into 2<sup>nd</sup> place on the day by just half a point, which meant that Birchfield avoided relegation and Stratford finished 2<sup>nd</sup> overall, while things were unclear as to whether a Midlands club potentially getting relegated from the national leagues would mean just one club was promoted. The latter situation was soon discounted and, after 3 weeks of deliberation, Stratford were awarded 1<sup>st</sup> place on the day which gave them overall victory.

Due to holidays and national competitions Stratford were missing some important performers at Worcester such as Chris and Dan Wright, Charlie Burn and Chris Bartlett, but the junior section's production line came up trumps again and Seb Croft made a sensational senior debut. Seb (1:75m) and Neil Hawkins (1:85m) got the meeting at Worcester off to a flying start with wins in the B and A high jump respectively; Neil competing in all 3 of the early events concurrently with the pole vault (3B, 2:40m) and the long jump (3A, 6:18m), which included 4 PBs! Joe Donaghue (6A, 2:40m) was the other pole-vaulter, just before his 400m hurdles (2B, 62:4), at the same time as Graham Black (5A, 25:08m) and Ben Shuker (6B, 16:41m) were earning valuable points in the hammer. With Ed Mills (4B, 5:33m) doing well in the long jump, and Joe Donaghue (3A, 12:08m) and Seb Croft (2B, 11:28m) excelling in the triple jump, both with PBs, things were going well in the field.

Back on the track things were also going according to plan, as generally Stratford seemed to be out performing Birmingham Rowheath, their rivals at the start of the day for the runners up spot. The 800m double by Joe Brocklehurst (1A, 1:56:3) and Rob Minton (1B, 2:04:2) was as good as anything seen all afternoon, the last 100m from both athletes showing great strength and determination, while Ed Mills picked up another 14 points in the 400m hurdles (3A, 62:5) and the 400m flat (5B, 56:7). In the 3000m steeplechase the water jump was not full enough and so was missed out, much to the disappointment of Keith Hawkes (4A, 11:00:1) and Tony Jackson (3B, 12:05:7), the latter belying his years of experience by not warming up properly, but the flat 3000m went more to plan with Rob Minton (5A, 9:37:8) and Jason Harman (8B, 11:52:9) performing well. Neil Hawkins continued a remarkable afternoon, even by his standards, by equalling the club record in the 200m (1A, 22:9) and then his own PB in the 100m (4A, 11:4), getting good support from Joe Brocklehurst (6B, 24:4) in the former and Joe Donaghue (6B, 12:2) in the latter.

James Chamberlain battled through magnificently in the javelin (3A, 46:19m) and shot (3B, 8.68m) despite a badly damaged arm, with Ben Shuker throwing well in the javelin (3B, 34:20) and the returning Jonathan Baty a big bonus for the club in the shot (7A, 8.77m). This just left the discus for the field events with Ben (27:92m) and Jonathan (21:39m) both coming 5<sup>th</sup> in the A and B competitions respectively.

The last few track events saw Joe Brocklehurst (2A, 4:05:0), alongside Steve Donnelly (5B, 4:57:0), bring the curtain down on his terrific season in the 1500m, Neil Hawkins (1A, 50:0) compete in his sixth individual event in the 400m, and Keith Hawkes (7A, 24:7) and Henry Lowry (4B, 22:5) pick up points in the 110m hurdles.

Despite threatening retirement Henry still has the ability to compete well at this standard and will be sharpening his spikes next May! With the club coming 5<sup>th</sup> in the 4x100m relay (47:2), the 4x400m boys then pulled out the club's second-ever fastest time (3:31:3) to win the race and, eventually, secure such a successful finale.

So in a few short years the club has risen from the depths of Midlands Division 6 to its highest ever perch in Division 2 and, although the standard of competition is bound to get tougher each year, the national leagues are something for the club to set its sights on for the future. Thanks must go to all the club's officials such as Daphne Hawkins and John Turner, but a special mention must be directed towards team manager Paul Hawkins whose enthusiasm and determination has provided the main drive behind the club's meteoric rise over the years. In a highly satisfying week for the club's senior men they also found out that they hadn't been relegated as originally thought at the end of the winter in the Birmingham Cross Country League – it's a rare event indeed for a club to be 'promoted' in both track and field and cross-country in the same week!