

When the winter skies of Stratford are grey and cold what could be better than heading south for a relaxing break in the milder climes of Majorca - and then putting your body through 26.2 miles of pain! Stratford AC's Mark Francis followed the example of clubmate Chris Seeney, who performed so well at Benidorm a month or so previous, by excelling all expectations at the Calvia Marathon on the largest of the Balearic islands. It was nicely apt that this was the 23<sup>rd</sup> staging of the event since it was also Mark's 23<sup>rd</sup> full marathon, and for someone to annihilate their personal best so far into a running career takes quite a remarkable performance. For a deaf runner, who is also a Birmingham City fan, overcoming adversity and providing the remarkable has become almost second nature, and his continually cheerful attitude must be an asset during those difficult last few miles of a marathon.

As Mark lined up for the early Sunday morning start at Magaluf Sports Centre things were looking perfect as cool, dry, sunny weather conditions produced a slight breeze. With 98 runners doing the full 2-lap marathon, and 88 others doing the 1-lap half, it isn't the biggest race in Europe but there were definitely some high quality competitors in there (as demonstrated by the winning time of 2 hours 27:51 minutes for the former). Each 21K lap looped round from Magaluf to Santa Ponsa, before an undulating section between Santa Ponsa and Palmanova that included a 3K steady climb along the by-pass and then down the hill into Palmanova itself. The last section along the sea-front back to Magaluf was blessedly flat.

Mark used all his distance running experience to pace himself perfectly, with a first lap of 1:33 (7 minute-miling) followed by a second one of 1:39 (7.5 minute-miling). Even though some slippage was inevitable in the second-half, he was continually overtaking people that he'd seen head off into the distance at the start, and by the end there was only one runner ahead of him who was older. Mark's fantastic effort of 3:12:43 put him as 5<sup>th</sup> over-40, and the lack of high-mileage training beforehand only highlighted his tremendous natural stamina. Having taken massive chunks off both his time from last year (3:20:59) and his previous PB (3:16:50 at London in 2000), he can now be even prouder of his achievements and die a happy man!

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For those excitable types who woke early on Christmas morning, and had finished playing with their new X-Box game by 8 a.m., Leamington C&AC put on their now traditional Emscote Christmas Morning Run. On a mild, grey day there were four Stratford AC runners amongst the 53-strong field, with the Marshall and Watkins families doing battle worthy of a festive soap opera. The course, which starts near the Avon Tavern in Warwick and takes in St Nicholas Park, Myton Road and Princes Drive, was advertised as 3.2 miles but was generally accepted to be slightly longer. Steve Marshall (19:20, 3<sup>rd</sup>) made a welcome seasonal re-appearance in his Stratford colours, and showed his class as he overhauled a Leamington runner in the last half-mile with a fine finish. The family duel was at its sharpest behind Steve, as his dad Phil (24:57, 20<sup>th</sup>) was just beaten by a strong run from young Luke Watkins (24:51, 19<sup>th</sup>). Natasha Watkins (32:16, 46<sup>th</sup>) used her local knowledge to put in a fine performance, and earn both her Christmas lunch and a quick visit to the Avon Tavern!

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Jane Mason showed why she'd just won Stratford AC's 'Most Improved Female' award as, for the 5<sup>th</sup> time in the year, she lowered her 10K personal best in the Andy Reading 10K. With 2 half-marathon PBs also to her name in 2006, it has not been

difficult to connect all the hard work that Jane has put into her training with her well-justified rewards of lower race times. Clubmate Natasha Watkins joined Jane down in Oxfordshire, and on a very flat course the potential for fast times was always there. The route took the 412 competitors out on the local roads around the village of Chesterton near Bicester, starting and finishing at the Bicester Sports Association HQ and taking in RAF Weston on the Green. The nearest the traffic-free race got to a hill was the bridge across the M40, but on a bitterly cold morning the 4K around the exposed and windy airfield was never easy. Jane's excellent time of 56:22 minutes put her into 314<sup>th</sup> place, while Natasha also performed well to finish just behind in 364<sup>th</sup> place as she recorded 62 minutes dead. Any Stratford AC runners looking for New Year's resolutions could do worse in following Jane's example of smarter, as well as harder, training!