

As predicted, Stratford AC's senior men's track and field team greatly improved their status in the second fixture of the season, and at the halfway mark are looking towards the teams above them rather than at those below. The Midlands' League Division 2 meeting was held at Brierley Hill, very close to the Merry Hill shopping centre, and the team finished a fine fourth out of eight on the day, leaving them sixth overall. The squad was a lot stronger than the depleted one that battled so well at Yate in May, but the absence of James Chamberlain and Graham Black in the field left a large hole that saw the club finish last in all of the A and B throws, apart from a penultimate placing in the A discus! The track and the jumps were a different story though, with some memorable performances all round.

Things started slowly on the track, with a slightly out of form Ed Mills (64:7, 8A) and an unwell Rob Minton (69:4, 5A) taking on the 400m hurdles. The following 800m saw a step up in determination though with Joe Brocklehurst (1:58:9, 2A) and Rob Minton (2:04:2, 2B) really attacking their races and getting their just rewards. This in turn helped give Charlie Burn (23:0, 3A) and Neil Hawkins (23:1, 1B) the confidence to perform extremely well in the 200m, traditionally one of the club's weaker track events. Next up was the 3000m steeplechase, and Steve Marshall (10:44:2, 4A) unfortunately just got outsprinted at the end of a terrific race, while Paul Hawkins (13:14:9, 4B) bravely stepped into the breach in what would never be described as his technically best event.

Out in the field things were a little mixed for Stratford, with Neil Hawkins (2:10m, 7A) ensuring some points in the pole vault, and a couple of spectacular throws from the club's strongmen saw Keith Hawkes (10:56m, 8A) and Paul Hawkins (9:92m, 8B) finish just behind the leaders in the hammer. The subsequent long jump competition was a cracker though, with Chris Bartlett (6:55m, 2A) showing his class as the top three all recorded their best jumps in an exciting final round, and Malcolm Hawkins (6:28m, 1B) demonstrating why he is missed so much. Chris (1:75m, 1A) was somehow managing to win the high jump at the same time as flying along in the long jump, ably supported by Charlie Burn (1:45, 6B), and then emphasised just how valuable he has become to the senior squad by romping to victory in the triple jump (14:02m). With Ed Mills (9:48m, 7B) backing Chris up in the triple jump things were looking bright, but that was as good as it got in the field events!

Alongside so many fine products of the club's junior section appeared the athletic vision that is Pete Law, slightly older at 63, who just turned up to support but in a time of need ending up throwing things that he hadn't thrown for nearly 20 years! In tandem with another aging legend, Henry Lowry, he competed admirably in the javelin (22:29m, 8A), before turning his arm to the discus (16:59m, 8B) alongside Mal Hawkins (22:29m, 7A). Henry (6:97m, 8B) then teamed up with Mal (8:73m, 8A) to get precious points in the shot putt. These performances may not seem anything to write home about, but in the final reckoning Stratford beat Dudley & Stourbridge to an invaluable fourth place by only 2 points – 2 points which these boys provided.

Back on the track and results were going well for Stratford. In the 110m hurdles Mal Hawkins (18:2, 2A) and Henry Lowry (22:4, 6B), both under the same strict training regime, showed fantastic technique in helping to compensate for a lack of running. The 400m has been a goldmine for the club in recent years and with Charlie Burn coming through the ranks this looks set to continue. Charlie (50:6, 2A) couldn't quite hold off the Halesowen winner, but the ever-impressive Neil Hawkins (51:2, 1B)

comfortably took the honours in his race, while in the 1500m Joe Brocklehurst (4:17:3, 3A) and Steve Donnelly (4:57:5, 5B) both seem to be learning a great deal from each outing in this tough event. A stumble at the beginning cost the normally quick-starting Stefan Ellis (11:5, 6A) dear in the 100m, but he is another junior showing tremendous promise, and a busy Neil Hawkins (11:7, 3B) scored heavily in the B race. Rob Minton (9:33:4, 4A) bravely decided to stay with the leaders for as long as possible in the 3000m, but his virus-ridden week eventually forced him to drop back, while Brennan Lively (10:54:6, 5B) ran a well-paced race and has added greatly to the team's distance running strength this season. This just left the relays, with a 4x100m team of Ed Mills, Chris Bartlett, Mal Hawkins and Neil Hawkins grabbing a hard-earned 6<sup>th</sup> place in a time of 46:3 seconds. Neil then led off a victorious 4x400m quartet of Rob Minton, Joe Brocklehurst and Charlie Burn, who recorded a speedy 3 minutes 32 dead. A fantastic winning race for the team was capped by a tremendous last leg from Charlie, although he stopped a few Stratford hearts in holding off the hard-pressing Tamworth and Halesowen teams.

Halesowen won the meeting, Tamworth lead after two fixtures and Stratford's total points of 206 was an improvement of 42 on the first outing, leaving Notts AC and Yate in the relegation spots and Stratford looking to overhaul Dudley & Stourbridge above them. So, a great team effort and thanks go to team manager Paul Hawkins and officials John Turner, Daphne Hawkins and Tony Jackson for all their endeavours.

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Just a reminder that the 'Stratford Summer Six' race will be taking place at Wilmcote this Saturday evening, and is open to runners of all standards and experience. The 6-mile race starts and finishes at Mary Arden's House, and entry can be obtained by turning up well before the scheduled 7:30 p.m. start.