

With only one fixture left in the Birmingham Cross-Country League Division 4 calendar promotion is hopefully looming large for Stratford AC's senior men, but it is an incredibly tight battle to see who wins the division. Bournville Harriers won their home fixture, and in doing so overtook Stratford in the overall standings to edge ahead by 12 points – the football equivalent of leading on goal difference. The home club kindly stepped in to put the fixture on at quite late notice, and the magnificent venue of Cofton Park provided a hilly course that was a 3-lap 10K variation on the highly successful 2005 national championships. Considering the amount of rainfall leading up to the race conditions underfoot were surprisingly firm, and with calm overcast conditions all afternoon the gods were being unusually kind to the runners.

Although there were the usual injuries and illnesses, the meeting saw another impressive turnout of 16 Stratford runners who all ran themselves into the ground for the club. None of the club's three galaticos – Joe Brocklehurst (36:02, 5th), Neil Hawkins (36:28, 8th) and Rob Minton (36:43, 10th) – were anywhere near full fitness, but in many ways their determination to do well for the team spoke far more about their character than some of their starring performances. Steve Donnelly (38:38, 24th) looks more and more confident with each XC outing, and hopefully he will be one place higher when the geographically challenged Trentham runner gets his just reward, while Wayne Vickers (40:52, 39th) proved his invaluable consistency once again. It's not often that a new name appears amongst the club's counters but Jason Harman (41:07, 45th), who finished a massive 20 places higher than in the previous fixture, has proved to be a revelation this season. His improvement has been spectacular, with a fast finish showing that he is building strength and stamina alongside speed, and his selection for Warwickshire's U20s in the prestigious Inter Counties event is deserved recognition. This gave the A team a total of 131 points, coming second on the day to Bournville's 81, and leaving the pair over 140 points clear of Trentham in third.

The rather melancholy background of Longbridge's deserted Rover factory provided the setting for round 3 in the Pete Hill (42:19, 59th) versus Steve Kirk (42:28, 60th) epic, with the former showboating to an enormous 9-second victory. Brian Thornett (42:40, 61st) was third back for the B team, and he continues to defy nature and make an increasingly successful comeback against all the odds, albeit on a course which suited his renown hill strength. Another nip and tuck battle was run throughout between Mark Francis (43:08, 68th) and Emerson Mayes (43:09, 69th), the latter making a very impressive XC debut at the start of what looks like a promising off-road career. The final B team counter was the hard working Tony Jackson (43:28, 72nd), and while the team's total of 389 points meant that they were second for the first time this season, to Bournville's 311, it still means they are 76 points ahead at the top of the overall B team standings. With all 6 counters covering only 14 places it shows just how strong the club currently is in those mid-place slots.

Team manager Paul Hawkins (44:00, 79th) found the going tough but never let his legendary determination drop, while Phil Marshall (47:31, 105th) put in an excellent performance to gain 5 places on his last time out. Luke Watkins (49:09, 119th) saw his tremendous enthusiasm pull him round, with Graham Black (50:19, 123rd) doing well to get back into things on a course that provided about 600 feet of ascent. So, it all comes down the final fixture at Stafford when it is hoped that all the Stratford boys are fighting fit and ready to emulate last year's track & field team in not only getting promotion but also winning the division.

The Watkins family are no different to any other in struggling to get out of bed on a freezing cold Sunday morning, but Luke and sister Natasha both had reasons to be glad that they did last weekend. The Stratford AC duo headed over to Kingshurst in north Solihull to compete in Centurions' winter 5-mile grand prix race, and their fine performances meant that Luke came away with a voucher for finishing as 2nd junior while Natasha produced a 5-mile PB. All of the 6 race series takes place on the same course, held on park paths, and in the 4th of these Luke flew round in 38:06 minutes for 61st place and Natasha crossed the line in 48:06 for 101st.