

Stratford AC's junior cross-country runners picked up where they left off in March, as in their first fixture of the new season they collected their largest ever points total from a single meeting. The West Midlands Young Athletes XC League involves 20 clubs from a wide area providing highly competitive opposition in the five fixtures, with the four age categories for both males and females (U11, U13, U15, U17) totalled up to give an overall placing. The first meeting was at Pype Hayes Park in Birmingham and, even with a number of athletes unavailable, the club amassed 3271 points compared to the 2639 of the previous year, which in itself was a big improvement.

With most of last year's medal winning U11 girls moving up an age group all four of this season's team were making their debuts, but they showed that they have the makings of another strong squad. Abbie Brooks (22<sup>nd</sup>) and Bethany Stokes (33<sup>rd</sup>) both excelled, with the former finishing strongly and the latter starting off quicker and, with Felicity Bee (37<sup>th</sup>) and Abigail Flynn (44<sup>th</sup>) also finishing inside the top half of the field, the quartet finished 10<sup>th</sup> out of 17. Amongst a large field of 135 the U13s more than held their own, and they were placed 11<sup>th</sup> out of the 20 teams with an excellent 706 points. Zoe Chandler (29<sup>th</sup>) was the only one not new to this age group, but she was slightly below par with tired legs. Molly White (33<sup>rd</sup>) ran well, Ellen Scholes (60<sup>th</sup>) just pipped Hannah Taylor (63<sup>rd</sup>) near the finish after storming runs from both, whilst Trisha Cooper (114<sup>th</sup>) is still lacking a little fitness despite recovering well after a knee injury. Finally for the girls, the Stratford pair in the U15s also picked up valuable points. Nienke Verwer (11<sup>th</sup>), making her XC debut for the club, looked really strong and would have finished even higher had she not been sick near to the end, while Katie Taylor (58<sup>th</sup>) started off this season as consistently as she finished the last one.

The U11 boys set a fine example to their elders as they finished 9<sup>th</sup> out of 18 in their category. Edward Caswell (10<sup>th</sup>) ran a very well paced race as he worked his way through the field to the end where he demonstrated a good sprint finish up the hill, George Bowyer (19<sup>th</sup>) made a highly impressive debut, and fellow debutant Alex Eves (64<sup>th</sup>) did well to keep battling through. Over this undulating, dry grassland course the two Stratford U13 boys, Howard Allison (63<sup>rd</sup>) and Patrick Eves (82<sup>nd</sup>), both showed great determination in their first race in this older age bracket. The U15s certainly excelled, as they came 6<sup>th</sup> out of 17 teams (the best of the day for the club) with an impressive points total of 641. Sam Taylor (17<sup>th</sup>) has been phenomenal this year and managed to take his summer form onto the grass, destroying his previous best position of 34<sup>th</sup>. Sam was tracked most of the way by an equally good run from Jack Allison (23<sup>rd</sup>), Fraser Weetman (58<sup>th</sup>) showed in the second half of the race how good he could be with a little more dedication to training, and Chris Bowyer (65<sup>th</sup>) picked up all important points for the team. Troy Tomlinson (45<sup>th</sup>) was the sole representative in the U17s, and his recent return to training was highlighted as he faded after a quick start.

Once all the totting up had been completed Stratford's juniors finished 11<sup>th</sup>, as opposed to 15<sup>th</sup> on the opening day of last season, so it was their best ever turnout, best ever start to the season, best ever position and best ever points total! With some of Stratford AC's juniors excelling in the County Schools inter-district race at Henley on Saturday the future is certainly looking bright for a few years to come.

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Edward Caswell then competed in the Midland schools biathlon at Cheslyn Hay Leisure Centre, winning the boys' race and helping the Shipston Primary School boys win the team event. They all had to swim 50m and run 1000m, Edward going off in the second swim heat and performing well to achieve a time of 34.47 seconds, which was the quickest by half a second. The run followed an hour and a half later, over a course on grass with a slight incline to the finish, and Edward controlled it from the front to record a terrific time of 3:43 minutes, winning by 14 seconds. The school also came second in the girls' team event, and the next target now, for those who qualified, is the national championships at Bath University in February.

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Look at any survey of the toughest races in the UK and the Snowdonia Marathon will always appear somewhere near the top, so the two Stratford AC runners who tackled it last week can be very proud of their performances. This gruesome challenge is totally on-road with the route encircling Snowdon itself; starting off from Nant Peris, up to the top of the Llanberis Pass, onto Beddgelert and Waunfawr, up to Bwlch y Groes and back to the finish at Lanberis. On a wet and windy day Tessa Faure pulled out a sparkling 4:08:49 to finish 543<sup>rd</sup> of the 1,175 survivors, while Kim Johnston, a regular at this event, completed it in 4:32:38 for 824<sup>th</sup> place. Since he went into the race in less than perfect condition he was highly pleased with his time, which was only a few minutes slower than his pb for this course, and he also managed to run all the way up the notorious big hill at the end.