

Stratford AC's senior men's track and field team will face a nervous last Midlands League fixture after their third meeting did not quite go according to plan, leaving the squad with the possibility of being relegated. After the euphoria of promotion last summer, placing the club at their highest ever level of Division 2, a season of 'what might have been' has followed. The fixture was held at sunny Tamworth and was typical of the year so far – a strong squad was hit by M40 travel problems, meaning four of the team didn't make it at all and many others were delayed and had no time to prepare properly for their events. Since Stratford were the only club travelling that way no special dispensations were granted, but it did once again highlight the tremendous spirit within the squad as everyone filled in with unfamiliar events.

The first few field events were somewhat cobbled together from who was around, although the points haul was more than reasonable – Graham Black (23:11m, 6A) and Paul Hawkins (10:23m, 8B) in the hammer, Joe Donaghue (2:70m, 5A) and Neil Hawkins (2:25m, 5B) in the pole vault, and Andrew Pozzi (6:24m, 2A) and Chris Bartlett (5:72m, 2B) in the long jump with the heroics. Joe did especially well given that he had no warm-up whatsoever, and had to join in at a much higher height than he would have preferred. The same names then continued on in the field, as they all strained for every point going – Graham Black (7:02m, 8A) and Paul Hawkins (5:15m, 8B) in the shot, Neil Hawkins (36:67m, 8A) and Keith Hawkes (3.99m, 7B) in the javelin, and Chris Bartlett (1:85m, 1A) and Rob Minton (1:45m, 8B) in the high jump doing the honours. To finish off the throws and jumps, Chris Bartlett (13:31m, 2A) and Joe Donaghue (11:09m, 4B) added to their excellent points tally in the triple jump, while in the discus a tiring Joe (22:61m, 8A) was ably assisted by the spectating Phil Marshall (12:83m, 8B), who showed much promise as an ageing track and field debutant!

Out on the track, the boy Donaghue (65:1, 5A) was showing his versatility as he and Rob Minton (68:8, 4B) started off proceedings in the 400m hurdles, with Joe Brocklehurst (1:57:1, 2A) and Rob (2:03:7, 2B) then getting just rewards for terrific runs in the 800m. Neil Hawkins (23:4, 5A) and James Clark (24:5, 8B) battled away well in what is not their favourite event, and they were followed onto the track by the steeplechasers, with both Steve Marshall (6:59:1, 6A) and Malcolm Bowyer (8:06:5, 5B) picking up good points. Charlie Burn (50:4, 2A) and the ever-busy Neil Hawkins (51:3, 2B) showed tremendous pace in the 400m, with a corresponding display of technique from Rob Minton (24:0, 7A) and Keith Hawkes (25:8, 6B) in the 110m jumping. A storming display of aggressive running from Joe Brocklehurst (4:15:5, 1A) in the 1500m, alongside Malcolm Bowyer (5:18:8, 6B), then lifted the whole team's morale. The last two track events still saw each Stratford competitor scrapping away for every point, and Andrew Pozzi (11:3, 4A) and James Clark (11:8, 7B) in the 100m, and Rob Minton (17:21:4, 7A) and Brennan Lively (18:33:3, 7B) in a warm 5000m, showed an admirable attitude.

At the end of a long and difficult afternoon the relays just about summed up the spirit of the squad, as tired bodies summoned up a club record in the 4x100m and hammered out a thrilling victory in the 4x400m. The 4x100m team of Andrew Pozzi, Chris Bartlett, James Clark and Neil Hawkins reduced the club record from 45:5 seconds to 45:0 in coming home 6th, whilst the 4x400m line-up of James Clark, Neil Hawkins, Joe Brocklehurst and Charlie Burn kept everyone on the edge of their seats with an heart-stoppingly tight finish! All 7 of the relay members are graduates of the club's remarkable junior set-up, and it can not be emphasised enough what a terrific job the junior coaches are doing in bringing through such talent.

On the day, the club ended up in 6th place out of 8, but still moved up to 5th overall on the season thanks to a poor showing from Dudley & Stourbridge. With Dudley now a point behind Stratford, alongside Kettering, there promises to be a titanic battle at Tipton in August to avoid joining Notts AC in the relegation drop.

One of the advantages of track and field is that there are no hills to climb, but some strange folk do seem to go off and actively search them out! The Devil's Chimney Chase takes place at Leckhampton Hill near Cheltenham, and three of Stratford AC's seniors popped along one beautifully warm and sunny Saturday evening to see what it was all about. What they found was a terrific off-road race, described as 'an almost 10K', starting and finishing at Old Pates' rugby ground at the foot of the hill, and taking in mostly trails and footpaths. The first half up to the top is, unsurprisingly, very tough going, but once moving along the top the runners are rewarded with fantastic views, before they head back down again through the woods for beer and barbeque! Almost Athletes, who organise the race, used to make everyone stop for exactly 2 minutes on the top to appreciate the view when it was their club race, and it would have been a novel feature to have continued this when it became an open race.

The first of the club's strange characters to tackle this challenge was Pete Hill, who was almost goat-like up the slopes and came back in an excellent 47:55 minutes, giving him 32nd place overall and a well deserved prize for the first male 55-60. Steve Kirk had a rare break from triathlon to record a fine 49:24 and claim 42nd spot, while Lesley Kirk showed her off-road skills as she finished 52nd out of a total field of 125, recording a time of 51:15. Drew Inglis (Darlington Harriers) led them all home in 37:52, Laura Kent (Cheltenham Harriers) was the first lady back with 41:52, and with such a favourable reaction from the runners this may have been the first staging of the event but definitely won't be the last.