

Last Saturday afternoon saw a dose of thoroughly miserable weather conditions for the 2007 Warwickshire County Cross-Country Championships at Leamington, but many of the Stratford AC performances managed to provide a few watery rays of sunshine. Despite a few late dropouts the club entered a total of 39 competitors, its largest ever, with some excellent individual efforts throughout the age categories being crowned by the veteran women winning a well-deserved gold medal in their class. To complete a satisfying day for the club Jonty Wilson finished a fine 5th in the U17 boys' race at the Gloucestershire equivalents down at Blackbridge.

The three U13 Stratford boys coped well on the muddy Newbold Comyn course, with Jack Allison (15:11, 20th) flying round the 3K lap and Michael Suren (15:49, 27th) having his best run of the season; looking much stronger than in his league races. Chris Bowyer (17:44, 40th) struggled a little, just needing to build up a bit more in his first season, but he did well to complete the team, who had a final total of 87 points for 10th place behind the winning home club.

The U13 girls put in some fine individual performances and were rewarded with a good team result of 7th behind the victorious Royal Sutton Coldfield team. There was another terrific run from Becky Young (16:08, 13th), who was ideally suited to the tough course since she continues to gain strength all the time, while Zoe Chandler (16:27, 17th) really needs the confidence to go harder from the start. Unfortunately she fell at a corner near the bottom of the steep Beacon Hill, but didn't sustain anything worse than yet more mud and some further experience at this level. Another fine, steady run from Katie Taylor (17:24, 26th) completed the team total of 56 points. Sam Taylor (19:33, 27th) may have been the smallest competitor in the U15 boys 4K event but he certainly must have had one of the biggest hearts, and he used it to good effect as he worked his way through the field after starting at the back.

The U20s men may have been a small field but with the county boundary being defined as the pre-1974 one, a number of quality athletes from the big city clubs are always going to be present. As it was, Jason Harman (29:24, 5th) was so confident of doing well that he decided to give the others a 60m start courtesy of a late loo visit, although he did do very well subsequently to make this up, with Luke Watkins (36:49, 7th) battling all the way to the end as he always does.

The seniors format was different to previous years in that the veterans (males over 40, females over 35) were only included in their own category, and not also in the seniors as is normal, with only 4 men and 3 women having to count in each team now. This really highlighted the continuing age shift in XC running, with the men having more finishers in the veteran's class than the seniors and the women having only a slight majority of seniors.

The senior and veteran women all ran together and did the same course as the U20 men; a 6K treat of 1 small and 1 large lap, meaning 2 delightful visits through a very sticky ditch and up the strength sapping hill. The 3 Stratford ladies all did the club proud, and were led back by another quality outing and strong finish from Dawn Davies (32:34, 19th). Dawn was well backed up by Georgina Hutsby (39:24, 41st) and Annabel Richardson (43:56, 43rd), giving the seniors' team a total of 103 points and 10th place behind victors Solihull & Small Heath.

The veteran women had a glorious win in their class, and even managed a B team coming 8th! Kate Wright (31:19, 3rd) again showed her undoubted quality, and perhaps with a slightly quicker start would have gained silver rather than bronze since she was stuck behind a number of slower runners on the first lap. Lesley Kirk (32:44, 6th) just seemed to take all the obstacles in her way without breaking stride, while the third leg of the winning team was a great run from Sarah Odell (36:45, 20th), with the 29-point total putting the trio well ahead of Solihull & Small Heath. The B team totalled 67 points and consisted of Tracey Bailey (37:09, 21st), not quite back to racing fitness yet, Sarah Bland (37:30, 22nd) and Maxine Horsman (38:05, 24th), who still kept smiling all the way despite the rain and mud!

In the senior men's 9.5K (1 small and 2 large laps) injury and illness withdrawals meant that Stratford finished with only the minimum 4 for a team. The first pair back for the club – Joe Brocklehurst (40:22, 20th) and Neil Hawkins (40:36, 22nd) – both put in excellent performances and were never too far away from each other throughout the race. Wayne Vickers (46:33, 48th) cleverly avoided getting cold and wet beforehand by turning up only 30 seconds before the start, but still used his power to good effect through the mud, with Phil Rapp (50:11, 61st) making an excellent XC debut in extremely difficult conditions. All of this left the club a very respectable 7th out of the 11 complete teams, with Coventry Godiva comfortably taking top spot.

The veterans, again, were in the same race and the 7 old boys were led home by a fine run from Malcolm Bowyer (46:57, 38th) and the right honourable Philip Howell (47:08, 40th), who at last is realising that his strength can be a big advantage at XC. Another deceptively strong run from Pete Hill (48:44, 52nd) brought him back third for Stratford, with the remarkable Brian Thornett (49:37, 57th) still churning out fast races at the grand old age of 65. Steve Kirk (50:07, 59th) found the going tough but persevered well, Allan Coldicott (52:41, 65th) made a rare Saturday afternoon appearance after his post round and one of the club's most reliable XC performers Phil Marshall (54:21, 70th) wrapped things up. Stratford's total of 187 points put them into 10th place amongst the 14 full teams, behind winners Kenilworth. Team manager Paul Hawkins did his usual sterling job organising everyone, standing out in the rain all day despite suffering from a heavy cold that prevented him from competing.