

For those members of Stratford AC who have been 'lucky' enough to obtain a London Marathon place the end is almost in sight. The last couple of weeks will have seen entrants starting to ease off their mileage in order that they're fresh for the big day a week on Sunday, and the pre-London races have reflected this as they've tapered from the higher-mileage endurance events down towards the faster 10Ks.

The Ashby 20 in North-West Leicestershire is one of the larger Midlands distance events, and this year there were 5 Stratford runners amongst the 825 finishers. They provided some outstanding performances, including two club records, which should give great encouragement for the bigger challenge coming up. The 2-lap, rural, 20-miler starts and finishes in Ashby-de-la-Zouch, with the main challenge being an undulating section between 5-10 and 15-20 miles around the villages of Heather and Normanton, although the weather tried its worst with periods of snow and blinding sunshine amongst the cold, blustery wind!

In these less than ideal conditions Kate Wright (2 hours 22:38 minutes, 112<sup>th</sup>) and Pete Hill (2:24:18, 117<sup>th</sup>) demonstrated their terrific current form, both setting club records for 20 miles in the process of coming 4<sup>th</sup> female and 3<sup>rd</sup> O50 male respectively. Kate took a massive 4 minutes off her time from 12 months ago while Pete's O50 age category club record relieved John Martin of one of the longest standing Stratford benchmarks, having been set exactly 20 years previously. Mark Francis (2:41:21, 269<sup>th</sup>) has had a disastrous build-up though and, with his persistent sinus problems continually disrupting his training, he has decided that sadly it will be at least another 12 months before he gets to make his London debut. Another stamina demon, Tessa Faure (2:47:20, 332<sup>nd</sup>), was next back whilst an outstanding run from Emma Bexson (2:55:28, 411<sup>th</sup>), having barely recovered from a serious chest infection, completed the Stratford roll of honour.

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Steve Donnelly had to endure similar weather conditions when he took part in one of the official pre-London half-marathons around Silverstone race track, but still managed an excellent time of 1 hour 23:28 minutes. With 6,105 finishers it's certainly not lacking numbers, but the strong wind on a fairly exposed and featureless venue rather dissipated the flat and fast nature of the course. The Stratford AC star is another in worryingly good form, and his fast time meant that he was a very impressive 55<sup>th</sup> amongst the massive field, and 5<sup>th</sup> quickest in his O40 age category. Having shown his pedigree by comfortably going under the 3-hour mark in last year's Berlin Marathon everything points to another successful outing on his first London run.

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For those wishing to push themselves, but on a slightly more forgiving surface than tarmac, then the Forest of Dean Half-Marathon in deepest Gloucestershire is an obvious choice. A dozen Stratford AC members joined over 1,500 others for this beautiful and undulating race, which is run on the cycle tracks through the forest and starts and finishes just outside Lydney.

Rob Minton (1:17:13, 4<sup>th</sup>) seems to be peaking at just the right time for his marathon debut at London, and he put in an exceptional performance despite having done his bit by racing for the club the day before. Lord Howell (1:27:14, 42<sup>nd</sup>) demonstrated that his 3-week marathon training plan could catch on if he continues to run so well, while the in-form Emerson Mayes (1:31:26, 79<sup>th</sup>) shows no sign of slowing up with another tremendous PB run. Another improver, Paul Johnson (1:33:22, 99<sup>th</sup>), was fifth back of

an excellent Stratford turnout, ahead of a captivating contest between Allan Coldicott (1:49:46, 483<sup>rd</sup>) and the incredibly consistent Sarah Odell (1:49:55, 487<sup>th</sup>). Presumably Kim Johnston (1:54:00, 601<sup>st</sup>) just happened to be running through the forest as part of some Melbourne to Glasgow ultra-race, and he led the irrepressible Maxine Horsman (2:00:48, 755<sup>th</sup>) out of the wilderness. Helen Monk (2:04:08, 819<sup>th</sup>) showed that she has gained strength as well as speed over the last 12 months, with Lady Schofield (2:07:02, 855<sup>th</sup>) seemingly enjoying her rare competitive appearance. The final pair for Stratford – Jane Mason (2:16:03, 991<sup>st</sup>) and Annabel Richardson (2:41:40, 1,112<sup>th</sup>) – kept the feel-good factor going for the club by both having strong outings, the former reducing her 2006 time by over 4 minutes.

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Neither Steve Marshall nor father Phil Marshall will be lining up in Greenwich, but they probably wished they were after both excelled in one of the harder warm-up races – Coniston 14. The Lakeland event is consistently voted one of the most picturesque races in Britain, and the fact that the course is around Coniston Water rather than through the mountainous surroundings may mislead first-timers into thinking that this is not a tough route. The pre-determined limit is always reached well before race day, with the undulating circuit often being the only unenjoyable part of a pleasant weekend away! Steve did not return south empty-handed after his extremely rapid time of 1 hour 23:53 minutes gave him a magnificent 15<sup>th</sup> place amongst the field of 1,359, with Phil, like all dutiful fathers, keeping an eye on him from a respectful distance and recording a fine 1:53:46 to finish in the 527<sup>th</sup> position.