

The first events of the triathlon season are usually cold and wet as the summer weather is yet to appear. But for three of Stratford AC's enthusiastic triathletes, a trip to Lanzarote ensured warm and sunny conditions for the Volcano Olympic distance race. This race attracts a strong UK contingent as well as other European competitors, who use it as a popular warm up event for Ironman Lanzarote that takes place soon after. At the sharp end of the race, elite competitors like Natascha Badmann and Luc van Lierde (both multiple Ironman Hawaii champions) are chasing prize money while mere mortals are just looking for a solid race on a challenging course.

Based at the popular sports resort of La Santa, the 1500m swim is one lap of the sea-water lagoon, followed by a two lap 40k bike that is both hilly and windy, and finally a two lap 10k run around the lagoon in the late morning heat.

Star competitor Debbie Cooper used her local knowledge and experience from her years at La Santa to feature strongly in the womens race, with her customary stellar bike leg propelling her to 8<sup>th</sup> position in 2 hours 35:39 minutes (26:20 swim, 1:18:45 bike, 46:46 run) and, most importantly, a prize at the evening awards dinner. Steve Kirk unfortunately discovered, after a good swim, that badly shaved legs didn't help conquer the bike and run, but was happy none the less with 144<sup>th</sup> place in 2:47:05 (28:49 swim, 1:25:20 bike, 48:20 run) that should prove a good base for future races. Completing the Stratford contingent was Dave Knight who took on the challenge of his first Olympic race with only two days acclimatisation, and having to share an apartment with two women, to complete in a creditable 3:04:28 (29:31, 1:39:14, 50:19) for 191<sup>st</sup> place.

Unsurprisingly, Natascha Badmann won the female race in 2:15:40 (23:36, 1:09:03, 40:07) but in the male race, Luc van Lierde was shaded into second place by Argentinean Francisco Pontano Roldan in 2:01:29 (19:05, 1:03:25, 36:15).

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In the slightly more bracing location of Nottinghamshire, Sarah Bland kicked her triathlon season off with the Southwell Sprint Triathlon; a 400m swim, 20k bike and 5k run that featured the 'Southwell Slope' early in the bike and run. Despite the challenge of aching legs and bursting lungs on this climb, Sarah posted a great time of 1:13:07 (8:24 swim, 41:47 bike, 22:55 run) for 11<sup>th</sup> in her category and 53<sup>rd</sup> female overall. As expected, local club Tri Fitness Nottingham (TFN) dominated with both male (Nick Dunn) and female (Louise Collins) winners in respective times of 49:28 and 56:32.

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Meanwhile a bit closer to home, the Ironman himself, Wayne Vickers, competed in an extremely wet Stratford 220 Triathlon and showed he hasn't lost his speed with a fantastic top 50 finish in this highly competitive race. His 41<sup>st</sup> place was achieved, despite having done very little winter training, with a time of 1:09:45 (no splits available) and only 8 minutes behind winner Chris Penn (St Albans) who flew round the 400m swim, 23km bike and 5km run in 1:01:13. Debbie Cooper upstaged Wayne though with a stunning win in the ladies race in an almost identical time of 1:09:44 (7:10 swim, 41:41 bike, 20:53 run) that gave her victory by over three minutes. Having just missed out last year with second place this was particularly sweet for Debbie.

There was a strong ladies contingent from the club with Naomi Whittaker competing in her first open sprint race finishing in 69<sup>th</sup> place in 1:26:57 (8:16/53:16/25:25) and

Georgina Hutsby finishing 134<sup>th</sup> woman in 1:35:17 (8:03/1:00:44/26:30). Tracey Bailey, Jenny Armitage and Helen Evans made up a terrific relay team that was narrowly beaten into 2<sup>nd</sup> place, by an all-male team, with a 1:12:30 overall time that included Jenny's 5:52 swim, Tracey's 45:24 bike and Helen's 21:14 run. New Stratford AC member Phil Groom bravely took part only a fortnight after successfully completing the Shakespeare Marathon, and he finished as a more than respectable 278<sup>th</sup> male with a time of 1:21:57 (8:20/51:11/22:26). Bearing in mind the appalling weather conditions for the later starters, these were very satisfactory results overall.

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Just to prove that she's not just an awesome swimmer, Jenny Armitage was at Arrow Valley Park for the Redditch Sprint. Starting with a 750m open water swim in the cold waters of the lake, she had a chance to warm up again with a 20k bike out to Ullenhall and back, via Gorcott Hill, and then a 5k run around the park. As expected Jenny's swim of 11:13 minutes put her in amongst the leaders and she clung on with a 39:02 bike and a 22:45 run to finish in 1:15:15 and 8<sup>th</sup> in her age group. The fact this was just 50 seconds outside the world qualification time for her age group shows what great things could lie ahead.

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Emphasising the wide-range of physical pursuits that Stratford AC members attempt to tackle, the remarkable Kim Johnston took part in The Grand Union Canal Race - Britain's longest, toughest, non-stop running race. It is run from the centre of Birmingham to the centre of London along the Grand Union Canal, and competitors are required to complete the 145-mile distance within the time limit of 45 hours. After starting well Kim, an experienced ultra-runner, started to get knee issues around 22 miles, which the rain then promptly compounded by soaking his running shoes and causing problems with his feet. This is the point when you start to wonder about the sanity of ultra-runners, as he just pushed himself through the pain barrier and kept going! Kim got to the 70-mile checkpoint with 25 minutes to spare and then 85-miles, the furthest he had previously run, with 45 minutes to spare. At the 100-mile check though he knew that it would be foolish to carry on and, since he was the last remaining competitor by this stage, he also knew he would be keeping the marshals waiting. It is difficult to emphasise the levels of stamina, physical strength and mental will that these people have to display, and for Kim to get so far is an unforgettable achievement. There were only 33 finishers and, for those who still cared, the first to complete the distance was Tim Holsgrove (29 hours 39 minutes) with the leading lady, Vicky Skelton, setting a new course record of 31 hours and 25 minutes in coming 3<sup>rd</sup> overall. Mad.