

The third fixture in the West Midlands Young Athletes Cross Country League saw a new venue at the Prison Service college at Newbold Revell, situated near Brinklow by Coventry, and another marvellous performance from Stratford AC's juniors. The club's youngsters once again bettered their highest ever total team score, and now move up to 14<sup>th</sup> place overall, overtaking Dudley & Stourbridge in the process. This was an even better result considering the squad were without all three of their U17 men through illness or injury.

On a cold and windy day the course, which included a loop of a small lake, was fairly flat but difficult due to the slippery and muddy conditions. As usual the U11 girls were in the first race, which caused a few worries for the Stratford team as with five minutes before the start only three of the six in the team had arrived. Fortunately the rest of the team arrived at the last minute and the Stratford girls continued their very strong form, led by Molly White with her best run yet in 9<sup>th</sup> place and followed by Chloe Connor (a season's best 29<sup>th</sup> despite tonsillitis), Ellen Scholes (40<sup>th</sup>), Trisha Cooper (47<sup>th</sup>), Hannah Taylor (71<sup>st</sup>) and Rachel Chandler in 75<sup>th</sup>, on her debut for the club. The team are now 4<sup>th</sup> over the season but very close behind Tamworth and Birchfield, so there is still all to play for with two races left. The U11 boys' team all had consistent runs although possibly not at their best. Despite this the team moved up overall to 9<sup>th</sup> place, so the squad of Ciaran King (37<sup>th</sup>), Edward Caswell (49<sup>th</sup>), Thomas Chapman (44<sup>th</sup>) and Patrick Eaves (59<sup>th</sup>) should all be pleased with their contribution.

The U13 girls' team had their best race of the season with two girls making their debuts for the season. First back for Stratford was Sara Copham in a fine 13<sup>th</sup>, closely followed by Becky Young, another showing a big improvement to 19<sup>th</sup>. Next home were Zoe Chandler in 25<sup>th</sup> and, completing the team, was Katie Taylor (55<sup>th</sup>). The U13 boys had a full team for the first time this season, and with some very strong runs from all the team finished in 8<sup>th</sup> place, moving them up to 10<sup>th</sup> overall. They were led home by Jack Allison in 19<sup>th</sup> place, who would have been even higher up if it wasn't for a slow start that left himself with too much to do in the latter stages. Behind Jack were Michael Suren (47<sup>th</sup>), who is starting to look more confident, and Fraser Weetman (66<sup>th</sup>) and Chris Bowyer (67<sup>th</sup>), who both finished very fast. The final counter for the U13s was Patrick Fraser (77<sup>th</sup>), doing well in his first race for the club. The U15 races saw just one Stratford runner in each, with Emma Copham having a terrific run to come 17<sup>th</sup> in a very strong field, whilst in the boys' equivalent Sam Taylor came a season's best position of 47<sup>th</sup>.

On a busy weekend the previous day had seen two Stratford athletes having strong runs in the Gloucestershire Schools Championships, both qualifying for their county teams in the upcoming Inter Counties event. In the Junior Boys Jack McMullen came 5<sup>th</sup> in probably his best race so far, while Jonty Wilson was 9<sup>th</sup> in the Inter Boys races. Meanwhile in the schools' races at Shipston, the Stratford athletes also showed good form. In the girls' primary school race Trisha Cooper had her first win, followed in second by Chloe Connor with Hannah Taylor in 8<sup>th</sup>. In the corresponding boys' primary school race Edward Caswell was first with Ciaran King third while, in this race for Year 6 boys, special mention should be made of year 3's Ben Taylor who came 24<sup>th</sup> and certainly looks one for the future.

In the Year 7 boys' race Patrick Fetherston had a strong run in third place, while in the race for Year 8 & 9 boys 4<sup>th</sup> place went to Jack Allison with Sam Taylor in 10<sup>th</sup>. The girls continued to perform well in the older age groups. There was a fine win for Sara Copham in the Year 7 & 8 race, closely followed in 4<sup>th</sup> by Zoe Chandler and

in 5<sup>th</sup> by Katie Taylor. Finally, in the Year 9 & 10 race Emma Copham was second in a very close finish.

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With the current running boom showing little sign of abating the racing world appears to never shut up shop, and this was perfectly demonstrated at New Year. Stratford members Steve and Lesley Kirk took part in a 6-mile multi-terrain race on New Year's Eve, while visiting relatives in Buckinghamshire, and four others overcame late nights and sore heads to travel over to Coventry for a New Year's Day on-road 5-miler. The former is a popular race that sells out well in advance, with 507 finishers completing the course this year. The 3-lapper consists of approximately 6 miles of scenic but testing terrain in the beautiful grounds of Cliveden House, with Yew Tree Hill and a 172-step path providing the main delights! Steve and Lesley amazingly dead-headed (again) in a time of 51:09 minutes, but Lesley just grabbed the 138<sup>th</sup> spot courtesy of a better dip on the line. This put Lesley 9<sup>th</sup> O40 female (out of 56) and Steve 53<sup>rd</sup> O40 male (out of 127). The four brave souls who visited a deserted Warwick University the next morning found an overcast day between the storms that provided quite decent running conditions. The 2-lap 5-mile route around the campus took the 160 finishers on quite a twisty course, and although there were no large hills much of it was undulating. Allan Coldicott (36:29 minutes, 71<sup>st</sup>), a man not prone to late night excesses, was rewarded for his restraint by being the first Stratford runner back, followed across by the line by another club stalwart, Chris Seeney (39:02, 93<sup>rd</sup>). 2006 saw giant strides, literally and metaphorically, from Naomi Whittaker (41:00, 108<sup>th</sup>), so hopefully this good start to 2007 will see a further continuation of her progress, while the prolific John Butler (47:40, 133<sup>rd</sup>) has also no doubt started the year as he means to go on – by racing as often as possible!