

September sees the start-up of the UK autumn marathon scene, and for those who prefer to do their long training runs in the summer rather than winter there is still, despite a large decline from the early 1980's, a reasonable choice of events from which to choose. With Abingdon being cancelled this year, Wolverhampton and Nottingham were left as probably the most local ones, and amongst the competitors in the former there were two from Stratford AC, as well as another eight doing the half distance.

Both of the Stratford runners in the marathon ended with excellent times, with Steve Donnelly having a fantastic top-10 finish and Tessa Faure coming in as 4th in her age category (female O35). Tessa's 4 hours 8:36 minutes put her in a fine 143rd place amongst the total of 238 finishers, but was unfortunately just outside the 'good for age' time for April's London Marathon that she, and many others, were hoping for. Even though there are no steep hills en route, the undulating 2-lap course has enough long inclines to make it tough to try and get a qualifying time there, and with the roads open to traffic for the second lap it is an even harder last few miles than normal. Therefore this makes Steve's effort of 2 hours 57:31 minutes even more remarkable, as he worked his way through the field on that lonely second lap to secure 9th spot and finish as 2nd male O40. The well-travelled stamina man had switched from his original plan of taking on his favoured Berlin event, but the change had no discernable effect as he came in only a few seconds outside of his Amsterdam PB, where the course is a lot flatter and faster. With a split time of 1:27+ Steve would have come 34th in the half, and his two-lap time was quicker than that of 43 finishers in the one-lap event! As for the eight who tackled 'only' the first 13.1-mile lap, they also achieved a variety of notable performances, led home by Emerson Mayes (1:31:11, 65th) with another quality run which put him well up amongst the 1,038 finishers. Although Kate Wright (1:34:40, 89th) struggled from fairly early on she used all her experience to battle on, and was rewarded by coming in 2 minutes quicker than 2006, placing her as 7th female overall and 2nd in her O40s age category. Mark Francis (1:38:01, 131st) hasn't been training much lately so can be relatively pleased with his performance, as can Darren License (1:44:36, 234th) who continues his journey from 'unable to walk' to forthcoming New York Marathon in an alarmingly short timespan, when lesser mortals would probably have just given it a miss this time round. Sarah Odell (1:49:58, 344th) may not have been over-impressed by parts of the route through some of Wolverhampton's finest industrial estates, but showed how far she has come in recent years by posting another great time, coming in well ahead of both last year's time (by 5 minutes) and Allan Coldicott (1:58:48, 521st) on one of his less spectacular days. On a day of warm, sunny intervals John Butler (2:20:49, 843rd) and Jane Mason (2:24:48, 875th) kept things going well, especially Jane who has packed in a heavy running schedule lately following a complete break and long holiday.

Michael Oliver is one of Stratford AC's most regular competitors, and he recently took part in the Leek Half-Marathon up in Staffordshire. The course is definitely not a PB one, with panoramic views over the moors providing some consolation for the 1,200 feet of climbing that has to be overcome, and the especially tough last 3 miles that will catch out anyone who set off too hard. Despite this, Michael had an excellent morning out, getting round the 13.1 miles in a time of 1 hour 52:45 minutes which put him into the 283rd slot amongst the 453 finishers, and well up in his O45s age category.

One of the great joys of running is doing events in beautiful and interesting locations, and the 'Macmillan Westonbirt 10K Tree Trot' fits into both categories. This is an event that regularly appears in the Runners World Top 100 races, with the 1-lap course taking the runners along undulating forest trails and gravel paths around the Old Arboretum and Silk Wood in the light of an early Saturday evening. The Forestry Commission arboretum near Tetbury in Gloucestershire does have a few twists and turns to slow the runners down though, and on a hot and dusty evening it wasn't all completely idyllic for the entrants!

There were three Stratford AC members amongst the field of 307, with the Shipston spitfire Pete Hill flying round in 43:18 minutes for 27th place to lead the merry trio home. Lesley Kirk (48:11, 69th) did not have quite such a happy outing, with the dusty trails playing havoc with her asthma, but she managed to keep everything together long enough to get across the line in a decent time. With no disrespect to this pair the highlight of the day from the club point of view though was the terrific sight of Karen Holmes racing again after a highly problematic 18 months. Her time of 65:01 minutes for 249th won't set the world on fire, but in the bigger picture is a great milestone as Karen looks to regain some fitness and build back up her well known stamina.

Recent recruit to Stratford AC, Martin Lewis, ventured back down to familiar territory when he took part in the 19th staging of the Bristol Half-Marathon, which is one of the UK's largest. The race starts and finishes in Bristol's historic Harbourside, and the fast sea-level course takes runners around the old city, past the Harbourside, out and back along the Portway, through the stunning Avon Gorge, and passes twice under Brunel's famous Clifton Suspension Bridge. Martin certainly seems to be doing something right at the moment as he raced around in a time of 1 hour 45:35 minutes for a fine position of 2,002nd out of the field of 9,076.