

Coundon Park in Coventry was the venue for the second Midlands Women's Cross-Country League fixture, and Stratford AC's senior women proved that the first meeting was no fluke as they managed to better their terrific start to the season. The 8 ladies repeated their 10th place from Senneleys Park, but amazingly went up from 4th to 2nd in the veteran's placings – pretty impressive given the large geographical scope of the non-divisionalised league! The flattish 6K-course probably suited the quicker road runners amongst the field, and Kate Wright (29:03, 30th) took full advantage as she flew round to lead the team home. Alison Bagnall (30:46, 48th) makes a massive difference to the squad, and with a cold-ridden Dawn Davies absent her return was especially timely, while Emma Bexson was only 4 seconds and 2 places further back, climbing an impressive 16 places from November's fixture. This gave the senior ladies' counters a total of 128 points and 10th position, and with Emma being a mere youngster Debbie Cooper (31:16, 58th) completed the veterans' team score of 136 and a podium place! Sarah Bland (33:29, 85th) and Lesley Kirk (34:21, 103rd) would probably have preferred a slightly tougher course, although the former's stunning rise of 32 places from Senneleys was a just reward for starting to ramp up her training between the two races. Sue LeBelleguy (39:39, 143rd) coped excellently with her XC debut, reportedly even enjoying it at times, while Karen Holmes (40:06, 145th) completed a valiant team effort as she continues her speedy return to full fitness. With a top 10 overall placing and runners up in the veteran's competition – they are currently only 1 point behind in third spot - starting to look increasingly possible, hopes will be high for January's penultimate meeting.

One of the Midlands' most festive road races took place last week, with the staging of the annual 10-mile 'Christmas Pudding Run' in the Lapland-like surroundings of Walsall. There were 683 runners in attendance, all trying to avoid that Christmas shopping trip, and the 5 Stratford AC members present took home more than just the mandatory pudding that all the finishers received. Despite setting out from under the M6 the undulating course soon heads off into the countryside and, with the wind and rain dying down before the start, everyone could enjoy the rural parts and cheerfully ignore the one or two busy sections being shared with the traffic. Kate Wright (66:29 minutes, 76th) continues to sweep all before her as she took the female O40s vouchers by over 2 minutes, with Emma Bexson (73:38, 193rd) rapidly heading in much the same direction as Kate. Sarah Odell's (80:54, 336th) fine efforts gave the female trio the ladies' team trophy, while Anna Schofield (91:52, 523rd) provided excellent back-up should something have happened to any of the first three. Amongst this gathering of gorgeousness Chris Seeney (92:50, 537th) did well to keep his mind on the road in front of him, as did Phil Nicholls (Tipton) and Emma Phillips (Birchfield) who took the overall prizes in times of 48:23 and 60:37 minutes respectively.

Probably due to the town's location, fell running is the one athletic discipline that Stratford AC are not quite so active in, but various adventurous individuals often make sorties into the strange world of steep ascents and even madder descents. Rob Minton is one of those outdoor types that regularly packs his vaseline and mint cake into a rucksack and heads for the hills, and his latest trip involved participating in the 20th Cardington Cracker – a 9-mile, category A (medium) race with 2,600 feet of ascent. The course near Church Stretton in Shropshire was made even tougher this year by gale-force winds, which meant that competitors often had to run at strange

angles just to progress forward. Running a hard XC race the day before is not really the greatest preparation, but Rob pulled out all the stops to come 26th out of the 216 hardy finishers. His excellent time of 86:21 minutes was just outside his sub-50 minutes 9-mile pb, while Lloyd Taggart (Dark Peak) and Helen Fines (Calder Valley) produced staggeringly good runs of 70:53 and 84:15, the latter being a women's record for the course, to take the top honours.