

In the fourth and final Birmingham Cross-Country League fixture Stratford AC's senior males gained promotion from Division 4, but they were deservedly beaten on the day to the top spot by a very strong Bournville squad. Unlike the final day disappointments of last year's relegation there was a completely different feeling about the outcome, despite failing to gain the title that they had hoped for. The team knew that they had run well and done themselves justice all season, with a much higher level of commitment from all of the club members, but they were just beaten by a better side. The fact that in the season's overall placings Stratford had the second individual, the second and third juniors, and won a highly competitive B competition by a whisker just underlined what a tremendous winter the team has had.

The venue saw a return to Stafford Common, where quite a few of the competitors had run at the Midlands championships a few weeks earlier, and the excellent 10K course provided its usual mixture of hills and flat, and firm and muddy. There was a pleasant cool afternoon to greet the fine Stratford turnout of 18, and as they lined up they were all eager to help overturn the 12-point deficit that Bournville held over them.

As in the first three fixtures Joe Brocklehurst (35:19, 3rd) led the team home, showing all his fighting qualities as he got past his man in the final stages despite suffering again from a tight back in the middle of the race. Joe fully deserved his trophy as the division's second placed individual for the season; an award which reflected his consistently high level of performance. This is something that Stratford's other two top 10 finishers - Rob Minton (36:26, 9th) and Neil Hawkins (36:35, 10th) – have also shown all winter, displaying a great deal of determination even when things haven't always gone their way. Steve Donnelly (38:30, 24th) and Jason Harman (39:42, 37th) were the next pair back, and they've both been massive bonuses for the club this season. Steve has put aside his initial reservations to start translating his impressive road form to the grass, while it is difficult to praise Jason too highly. Apart from a trophy for coming second junior during the season, he has moved his finishing position up from 65th to 37th, and gained invaluable experience and mental toughness along the way. The ever-reliable Malcolm Bowyer (39:46, 38th) completed the A team counters, despite miscounting in a 3-lap race and making a sprint for home somewhat prematurely, and this saw them to a fine total of 121 points, although not enough to counter Bournville's tremendous tally of only 69.

Keith Hawkes (39:55, 40th) was the seventh Stratford finisher, showing all of his experience by cleverly swapping to the winning B team when he saw that the A team were going to finish runners-up, with Sheffield's finest Paul Johnson (41:55, 60th) just behind. The remainder of the B team counters all came in consecutively - Mark Francis (42:04, 63rd), Pete Hill (42:15, 64th), Steve Kirk (42:23, 65th) and Brian Thornett (42:26, 66th) – and this season their consistency has provided the backbone of the whole squad. This gave the B team a total of 358 points, against the 20-strong Bournville's 318, but still meant that Stratford took first place by the narrowest of margins - 1443 against 1479. This is a great reflection on both the amount of senior males who turned out during the season, and on team manager Paul Hawkins' organisational and persuasive qualities!

For the second time this winter the squad managed to put out a C team with Tony Jackson (43:12, 70th), not quite on the same form as his electric start to the season, and the hard working Paul Hawkins (43:14, 71st) leading them back. Debutant Chris Hall (45:57, 100th) showed great promise and will undoubtedly get quicker as his confidence increases, while Phil Marshall (47:26, 110th) should be a good candidate

for clubman of the year after another full set of appearances this season. The day's second debutant, Darren Licence (48:11, 112th), probably won't have quite the same happy memories as Chris Hall, since he managed to lose – and struggle to even re-find – a shoe at his very first ditch! All credit is due to Darren's battling attitude that he didn't just give up there and then, and the experience he gained from the remainder of the race will hold him in good stead for the future. Luke Watkins (49:13, 116th), another who always turns out for the club, completed the Stratford contingent, and in doing so he also deservedly claimed the prize for the season's third highest junior. The detailed league structure for next season has not been decided yet but, due to a lack of venues, the four existing large divisions will be made into three even bigger ones. Wherever the Stratford senior males end up though, the most important thing is that they have all done themselves and the club proud this winter.

A small squad of 6 Stratford AC runners made the long trip up to Sunderland last week for the English National Cross-Country Championships, and they were rewarded with an excellent course and some fine performances. The venue was Herrington Country Park, a reclaimed pit area just outside the town, and despite a wet winter the ground underfoot was nicely firm. The main circuit basically consisted of two longish inclines on one side and then a long flat section along the other, which on the day was straight into a strong headwind. From the club's juniors Katie Taylor (13:51, 199th) used her increasing strength to good effect in the 3K U13 girls' race, with brother Sam (19:57, 246th) and Jack McMullen (17:46, 162nd) more than holding their own in the 4.5K U15 boys' event. On the seniors side there were three Stratford males contesting the 3-lap, 12K, 1000-strong competition. Rob Minton (44:37, 224th) and Paul Hawkins (54:53, 694th) both had very strong outings, especially given their heavy London Marathon training, with Keith Hawkes (52:17, 591st) the third of the trio.