

At the halfway stage in their Birmingham Cross Country League campaign, Stratford AC's senior men are looking odds on for promotion to Division 2 after another highly satisfactory – and very muddy – afternoon out. With three of their six A scorers from the first fixture unavailable the squad knew that each one of them had to work extra hard to cover this loss, and that was exactly how it worked out. The meeting was being staged by Nuneaton Harriers at Burbage Common, and the team was all too aware from previous visits that while the course is as flat as they come this is more than balanced out by long stretches of shin-deep, strength sapping mud. With a slight course re-design, in preparation for January's county championships there, the three-lap race was slightly longer than the usual 10K distance.

Joe Brocklehurst (35:36 minutes, 1st) ditched problematic new spikes in favour of the tried and tested, and roared round to win against quality opposition by an even bigger margin than at Sennelys Park. Rob Minton (38:18, 6th) first showed his talents on the pre-race jigsaw build and then followed it up with a storming run over the mud, but the star of the day was probably Danny McMahon (38:58, 9th). Danny is a recent recruit to the club, and for him to do so well in his first proper XC race is a notable achievement, especially given his fairly conservative start. Wayne Vickers (41:37, 24th) demonstrated that he's getting back to form after a period of limited training, while Malcolm Bowyer (42:14, 31st) showed how much he was missed in the first meeting. Keith Hawkes (42:52, 38th) completed the A team counters, and whilst their total of 109 points was higher than the 86 of Sennelys it could have been much worse given the absentees. This put the team into second place on the day, behind an imposing total of 57 points from Bournville, and consolidated their second place overall, leaving them 112 points ahead of third-placed Dudley Kingswinford. First back for the B team was Andy Cockerill (43:39, 46th) who has taken to XC like a duck to mud, just ahead another very welcome returnee, Robin Corder (44:16, 56th), who is already showing how useful he will be as the season progresses. Paul Hawkins (44:35, 59th) is in the middle of quite a renaissance, and it showed as John Turner (45:21, 72nd) had to work very hard just to try and stay on his tail. Pete Evans (46:32, 81st) finally managed to finish his first XC race, only 12 months after starting a somewhat ill-fated debut, with Pete Hill (47:10, 89th) completing the B scorers after a strong showing. With a total of 403 points, an 80-point improvement from meeting one, this left the B team remaining in third place, only 16 points behind the current runners-up Dudley Kingswinford. All of Stratford's B runners finished ahead of at least one counter from 10 other clubs' A teams, pushing out their scores considerably. Team manager Paul Hawkins had done a magnificent job in getting 19 Stratford runners on the start line, dressed and pointing in the right direction, and if there was a C team competition then Steve Kirk (47:31, 92nd) would have been the first back over the line for them. Tony Jackson (48:48, 108th) and Darren Licence (48:59, 111th), who is fast finding his feet in this peculiar discipline, managed to edge themselves to the head of a large group of Stratford runners, with the final 4 from the club all in a line behind them. Martin Lewis (49:22, 114th), another newcomer starting to gain confidence, Phil Marshall (49:24, 115th), Mark Bullock (49:36, 116th) and Luke Watkins (49:43, 117th) all managed to work off each other during the race and, most importantly, were still pushing other teams' A and B counters further down the field.

Joe Brocklehurst leads the individual divisional rankings after two races with a perfect score of 2, while Rob Minton is equal 4th on 13 points and Luke Watkins leads the junior placings with a total of 5 points. With all three of the missing Senneleys'

counters hopefully returning for January's penultimate fixture at Birmingham's Cofton Park, the confidence factor should certainly be flowing through the squad.