

Stratford AC's senior cross-country squads bid farewell to the winter mud with performances typical of a highly successful season. The ladies finished their Midlands Women's XC League campaign in a highly impressive 9th position, bearing in mind that this a non-divisionalised league for the whole region, whilst the men, competing in the Birmingham League, gained promotion as they finished 2nd to Bournville in Division 3, a year after finishing 2nd to Bournville in Division 4!

Stratford's women competed at Plock Court (Gloucester), a fairly flat but not spectacularly interesting course, with a healthy contingent of seven ready to do battle. Emma Bexson (27:33, 41st) should have tired legs as she peaks her Rome Marathon training, but instead she seems to have gained strength and speed, with Alison Bagnall (27:41, 43rd) just behind emphasising her off-road running prowess. Debbie Cooper (28:27, 51st) is starting to pick her running up as she moves towards the World Triathlon Championships in Vancouver, with Yvonne Caswell (29:22, 59th) making an excellent contribution to the club cause on limited training. Sue Le Belleguy's (36:47, 103rd) determination to get quicker on the mud and grass looks like it is starting to make a real impact, which just left long-term injury returnee Annabel Richardson (41:13, 106th) and a spirited performance from Victoria Jeffs (41:33, 107th) to wrap up another fun afternoon!

So, the team finished 10th on the day with a total of 135 points from their 3 counters, with the masters team reaching 7th with 197 points from the first 3 Stratford over-35s (Bagnall, Cooper and Le Belleguy). This left the senior ladies in a fantastic 9th overall position for the season, just ahead of Rugby & Northampton, whilst they will have looked at Bournville in 2nd place in the overall masters rankings and known that those medals could have been theirs if they had just managed to get a complete team out for the third fixture. In each of the last few years the Stratford women's XC team has made significant progress, and in terms of both quantity and quality this squad have undoubtedly proved themselves to be the club's best ever. Despite being beaten on the day by Birchfield, Telford took the women's title, and their first runner back, Claire Martin, took the individual honours.

The men meanwhile had the more scenic setting of the now familiar Stafford Common, but paid the price for this scenery with long stretches of heavy mud and some testing inclines. The remarkable Joe Brocklehurst (36:16, 1st) completed a perfect league season as he stormed to his fourth straight victory, this time by 43 seconds, with Steve Marshall (37:06, 4th) valiantly giving chase just behind. The likes of Marshall, Patrick Taylor and Danny McMahon have been massive bonuses for the club this season, but Rob Minton (38:44, 9th) and Brocklehurst have once again proved to be invaluable ever-presents as the backbone of the team. McMahon (39:06, 11th) himself just missed out on a top-10 spot, and after this quartet of splendid placings any sort of reasonable showing from the last two A counters could have given the club victory on the day. Unfortunately though, as has been the case all season, this never quite materialised, and the only minor consolation that Keith Hawkes (42:04, 35th) had during a desperately poor run was that Malcolm Bowyer (42:58, 42nd) was having an even worse one just behind him. This left Stratford 26 points behind Bournville on the day and 129 behind on the season, with Dudley Kingswinford another 148 points back in 3rd place overall.

Andy Cockerill (44:04, 55th), whose fine XC exploits now seem to be powering his road running improvement, led the B counters home, just ahead of another impressive showing from team manager Paul Hawkins (44:40, 62nd). The fact that Stratford were one of only three clubs in the division to get enough runners out in each fixture for an

A and B team is a deserved accolade to all the effort that Hawkins puts in. John Turner (46:32, 76th) has worked tirelessly this season on his less favoured off-road and it is starting to show in his all-round strength and speed, while Shipston's finest, Pete Hill (47:39, 87th), produced his best XC performance for a while. Roger Wilson (48:28, 97th) made his eagerly anticipated return to the mud after long-term injury, and his great resolve pulled him through this tough test, while Mark Bullock (49:33, 110th) can again be proud of his efforts in his debut XC season. The B team ran up a total of 488 points to finish third on the day and also over the whole season, and they have not only shown the increased strength in depth at the club but have been vital in pushing other teams' A scorers further down the rankings.

Mr Consistency - Phil Marshall (51:10, 123rd) – pushed himself hard all the way to the finish, whilst Luke Watkins (51:50, 127th) edged a close tussle with the increasingly strong James Deacon (52:07, 132nd). This completed the 15-strong Stratford turnout, and the post-race, post-season prize-giving saw Joe Brocklehurst (1st over 3 and 4 races), Steve Marshall (3rd over 3 races), Rob Minton (5th over 4 races, 9th over 3 races) and Luke Watkins (1st junior) all receive their hard earned plaudits. Life in Division 2 next winter will be challenging but, after such a successful season, it is one in which the squad are greatly looking forward to and know that they can thrive in.

If you'd like to sample the benefits of running with others then Stratford AC are holding an adults' (over 16) open evening for all abilities next Wednesday (19th). Just turn up at the Sports Club in Swan's Nest Lane at 6:30, bringing some kit if intending to run, or see the contact details on www.stratfordac.co.uk.