

Stratford AC's senior and junior cross-country squads joined forces for the Midland XC Championships at Leamington, and came away with some fine results from a number of high-quality races. The Newbold Comyn course was surprisingly firm underfoot, but from the early races it was quickly obvious that anyone who took liberties with the wide, muddy and wet ditch was likely to meet a sticky end!

Howard Allison (16:07, 106th) led things off for the club in the 1-lap, 3K U13 boy's race, and he did well to continue the improvement that he's been showing all season, especially since this was the highest-level he has ever competed at. Next up was Luke Watkins (49:28, 46th) in the junior men's (U20s) 2 large, 1 small lap, 8K event, and despite struggling against such quick opposition he made sure that he kept pushing right to the end.

The four Stratford girls in the U13s race did the club proud, with Zoe Chandler (14:54, 28th) leading the quartet home in fine style. Her improving confidence showed in the greater aggression at the start, and she then kept a good consistent pace for the rest of the 3K race. Molly White (15:53, 67th) had a steady run behind Zoe, but Ellen Scholes (16:36, 88th) had her best ever performance, which is even better considering the standard of competition and the fact that she had no warm-up at all. In these short and sharp races a poor start can often not be clawed back and, although sometimes it can't be avoided, it is very unfair on the runners to get them there too late for a proper warm-up and preparation. Holly Pyne (19:25, 124th) has only just started doing cross-country, but is progressing well and showed great determination to get past a number of rivals in the latter stages. Holly's efforts also meant that the four girls came a very respectable 15th in the team competition with 307 points, one place ahead of Leamington. The following week Zoe, Molly and Ellen showed that this form was no flash in the pan as they finished an impressive 3rd, 4th and 7th respectively at the Warwickshire Schools XC at Princethorpe.

In the 4K, 1 large lap event for the U15 boys Jack Allison (17:43, 65th) had a strong run, consistently picking people off throughout, and was another to use it as a springboard for the county schools where he came 5th. The U15 girls competed over the same distance and Becky Young (19:45, 62nd), who is getting quicker all the time, had a terrific run and was another top 10 finisher at the county XC seven days later.

Onto the seniors, and on a pleasant afternoon for running a fine turnout of 10 Stratford women lined up for their 6K race. A titanic struggle to be the first back then ensued, with Dawn Davies (26:43, 60th) and Sarah Bland (26:50, 63rd) slowly closing the gap on Kate Wright (26:56, 66th) before moving ahead in the latter stages. This may not have been Kate's quickest race ever, but it is still a terrific reflection on how much stronger Dawn and Sarah have become, and after carrying the burden of the Stratford women's expectations for so long it is good that Kate can now count on more support around her. Emma Bexson (27:38, 82nd) and Debbie Cooper (28:26, 90th) are both in the middle of heavy training, Rome Marathon and cycling respectively, so did well to grind out decent times, as did Alison Bagnall (28:35, 93rd). Lesley Kirk (29:41, 109th) and Sarah Odell (30:42, 125th) will have used the tough course to build strength for their London Marathon training, whilst Maxine Horsman (32:18, 147th) reminded herself of how painful XC is with her first outing in quite a while! Sue Le Belleguy (36:38, 174th) showed massive determination in only her second XC race, despite running in borrowed shoes that were just too large for her, and that attitude will stand her in great stead for the future. This left the two Stratford teams in a very

encouraging 12th and 18th places, out of the 28 complete teams, with Charnwood taking the Midlands title again.

The thirteen Stratford males also showed some good form, with their 12K course containing a gruelling 3 visits both to the top of Beacon Hill and the bottom of said ditch! Joe Brocklehurst (43:44, 31st) took the chance to test himself against some of the best runners in the country with both feet, flying around to leave some remarkably quick athletes in his wake, with Steve Marshall (45:18, 65th) also taking his fine league form up a notch. Patrick Taylor (51:18, 165th) had his best run for the club as he learns how to pace himself better with each outing, while Keith Hawkes (52:06, 185th) and Malcolm Bowyer (52:07, 187th) just had their own private battle, with the best man scraping home eventually! Another one learning with each race is Andy Cockerill (55:09, 255th), and his fine run gave the A team a total of 888 points and 15th place out of the 41 complete teams.

Pete Evans (55:40, 263rd) probably had his strongest XC run yet as well, but never really recovered from having to stop and re-tie his laces; something that's fatal at this level. John Turner (58:10, 301st), Tony Jackson (58:21, 304th) and Steve Kirk (58:36, 307th) dragged each other round, with Tony just avoiding a spill in the ditch, and Pete Hill (60:32, 321st) again showed how well he is running at the moment. Phil Marshall (61:25, 329th), probably the club's most consistent XC runner over the last couple of seasons, wrapped things up for the B team, and their total of 1825 points earned them the 39th position. This just left Dave Maundrell (63:53, 344th) to complete the Stratford squad, and he showed great spirit in making his XC debut in a such tough event, and even found time to give the large crowd of vultures gathered at the ditch something to loudly cheer with a bit of a slip! Notts AC took the men's title fairly comfortably from Leicester's OWLS, and as the UK cross-country season starts to draw to a close for another year many will be looking forward to the forthcoming national championships at Alton Towers.