

The build-up towards the spring marathons, such as London and Stratford's own Shakespeare Marathon, is only just reaching its peak, but Stratford AC's Emma Bexson has already managed the wonderful achievement of completing not one but two of these gruelling challenges within a short space of time.

Competing at two of the world's most popular tourist destinations – Rome and Draycote Reservoir near Rugby – Bexson produced two stunning performances, both of which put her up at the top end of the finishers. The Draycote Water Marathon, a warm-up for the Italian adventure, basically consisted of 5 flattish laps of the pretty reservoir and, combined with a bitterly cold morning, was a great test of both her mental and physical strength. A tremendously strong run saw Emma's hard cross-country work over the winter pay off as she finished up 19<sup>th</sup> overall and as the 3<sup>rd</sup> female, registering a time of 3 hours 33:08 minutes. The multiple lap format meant that there was usually someone nearby in this well organised event, and Emma could always console herself that she wasn't doing the 35-mile ultra alternative that was taking place at the same time!

The Rome Marathon could not have been more different as 75,000 spectators lined the streets on a pleasantly sunny day, and with the Pope appearing on Palm Sunday, and big football and rugby events also taking place, the Italian capital had an almost carnival atmosphere. The tough course consisted of a series of narrow cobbled streets that twisted its way through most of the famous monuments that Rome is well known for, and as if a marathon isn't tough enough the last three miles climbed uphill from the Trevi Fountain through the ancient streets up and around the Colosseum. Despite all the travel, lack of sleep and sightseeing miles in her legs Emma produced another storming performance to finish in 3 hours 35:03 minutes, which placed her 2,385<sup>th</sup> out of the 12,080 who made it round and a terrific 119<sup>th</sup> out of the 1,680 female finishers.

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The Dursley Dozen in Gloucestershire may be 'only' 12 miles long, but the picturesque terrain with 1600 feet of ascent manages to fool the legs into thinking that they've done a whole lot more! On a cool sunny morning 8 Stratford AC members lined up amongst the slightly apprehensive field of 403, and with the start from the Old Spot Inn taking them immediately up a long, steep hill they were left in no doubt as to the nature of the race. Much of the first 6 miles takes the runners up and down woodland tracks, but just before halfway comes the climb up from Waterley Bottom that is usually walked, and then once you've recovered from that at 10 miles there is the infamous 'Precipice' back up to the top of Stinchcombe Hill, where ropes are provided because of the severity of the ascent!

Phil Howell (1:36:35, 65<sup>th</sup>) used his great strength to good effect to be first back for the club, and he was followed home by three colleagues in the middle of their London Marathon training. Kate Wright (1:38:13, 80<sup>th</sup>), Mark Francis (1:47:40, 162<sup>nd</sup>) and Sarah Odell (1:58:57, 296<sup>th</sup>) will hopefully reap much benefit from all this hard work come April 13<sup>th</sup>, but in the meantime they can be very satisfied with their showings in this enjoyable challenge. Dave Maundrell (2:00:58, 304<sup>th</sup>) seems to be translating his fine road form in 2007 into equally impressive XC and multi outings in 2008, and Dave was just ahead of the mileage machine that is Kim Johnston (2:07:03, 328<sup>th</sup>). The flying postman Allan Coldicott (2:12:29, 355<sup>th</sup>) wasn't quite back to top form, whilst Anna Schofield's (2:20:06, 379<sup>th</sup>) renown determination will have made all the difference in an event such as this. The 20<sup>th</sup> staging of this testing race saw Julian Hatcher (Westbury Harriers) win the event in 1:18:13, and Helen Fines (Bristol & West) as first lady in a mightily impressive 1:25:51 (10<sup>th</sup> overall).

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Stratford AC had their best ever total of four athletes selected for the Warwickshire team to take part in the prestigious Inter Counties Cross-Country Championships held, as always, at Woollaton Park in Nottingham. Unfortunately Joe Brocklehurst (foot) and Nienke Verwer (hip) had to withdraw from the senior men's and U15 girls' races respectively, but Zoe Chandler and Steve Marshall, both competing at Nottingham for the first time, did club and county proud in the U13 girls' and senior men's events. Zoe came an excellent 119<sup>th</sup> amongst the cream of young English XC talent, being 5<sup>th</sup> counter for Warwickshire and helping the county to 20<sup>th</sup> place, whilst Steve, stepping in at very late notice, was 203<sup>rd</sup> for a squad that reached the dizzy heights of 11<sup>th</sup> place. The experience of running at such a high-powered occasion should hopefully push both of them onto even greater things next winter.