

Visit Alton Towers and you can usually hear the screams from the car park as the visitors go up and down; well last Saturday was no different, although this time the theme park was hosting the Saucony National Cross-Country Championships! In these days of XC venues bearing more of a resemblance to track racing, the nationals can still always be relied upon to provide a proper test of all the relevant elements – strength, stamina and balance, as well as pure speed. The beautiful, rolling countryside of the Staffordshire Moorlands duly provided this test on a course just over the road from the attractions, with each undulating 4K-lap consisting of a higher and lower section and an extremely steep hill of about 100 metres linking the two.

From a Stratford AC point of view there were 24 members present, ranging from the young, not so young and just plain old. Jack McMullen (13:36, 173rd), Jack Allison (13:45, 191st) and Sam Taylor (14:15, 264th) had the dubious honour of leading them all off in the first race of the day, but the U15 boys did the club proud with all of them running well, with Allison and Taylor moving up through the field strongly after starting the 4K event fairly conservatively.

The U13 girls then continued this fine showing, although like the U15 boys were just one short for a team placing, especially impressive since all three of them were in their first year at this age group. Molly White (13:36, 176th) led the others all the way round the 3.2K route, with Ellen Scholes (14:33, 275th) probably having her best run ever and the fast-finishing Hannah Taylor (15:09, 318th) completing a highly enjoyable experience for the trio. They will not have been used to running up such tough inclines, or amongst such a large field, and promptly showed the seniors how to celebrate properly by stopping overnight to enjoy the delights of the park the next day!

Stratford's U15 girls had the full 4K-lap to contend with, and the three saw slightly more mixed results than the U13s. Nienke Verwer (14:59, 96th) is a class act and started well, but three weeks of illness was always going to be found out on a course like that, and although she battled right to the end there was very little left in her legs after the hill climb. The course was much more to the suiting of Becky Young (15:52, 191st) who steadily worked her way through the tough stretches, while Katie Taylor (16:39, 239th) struggled a little up the last long, muddy incline but then used her speed on the downhill straight to regain even more places than she'd just lost!

Howard Allison (13:44, 303rd) was the club's sole representative in the last junior race of the day, the U13 boys 3.2K event, and despite being in the younger half of the age group and also being very new to this sort of thing, he showed tremendous character and strength to keep going so well.

The penultimate race of the afternoon then saw the senior ladies take centre stage over a testing 2-lap 8K stampede, and the three Stratford females should all be delighted with their showings. Dawn Davies (30:41, 176th), Emma Bexson (31:19, 206th) and Sarah Bland (31:56, 227th) all had good reasons not to perform well, but instead of complaining like their male counterparts would have they just got on with it, and were rewarded with finishing positions easily in the top half of the large field! Winchester & District AC took the ladies' team prize, whilst the crowds were treated to a quality piece of front-running from Liz Yelling who destroyed the trailing pack.

The final event of the day saw the 121st senior men's championships, with nearly 1,300 competitors standing on the start line ready to do battle over the 3-lap 12Kish route. On a mild day conditions were good for the large field, but sheer weight of numbers meant a fairly slow first mile for those in the main bunch. Joe Brocklehurst (35:59, 103rd) again emphasised what a quality performer he has become, finishing

agonisingly close to a prestigious top-100 slot as he led the 11-strong Stratford contingent home. Two more key members of the club's Birmingham League squad followed Joe back, with Steve Marshall (38:10, 234th) and Rob Minton (39:56, 365th) racing round, although the latter can still not quite shake off his virus-ridden start to the year. Patrick Taylor (43:11, 587th) has been a massive plus for the club in his debut XC season, and after a steady start he pulled away in the second half from Wayne Vickers (43:52, 637th), another who is slightly under the weather these days. Keith Hawkes (44:36, 695th) left it even later to move away from a fine run from Paul Hawkins (45:28, 746th), only really getting the better of him on the last jaunt up the hill and the difficult finishing stretch, while Tony Jackson (47:38, 886th) showed that every week he's regaining much of his old speed and strength. James Deacon (51:04, 1,056th) has shown great character in tackling some extremely gruelling courses in his fledgling XC career and he showed the same spirit again on Saturday, keeping moving well even though his legs had nothing in them after the third trip up the hill. Phil Marshall (51:45, 1,087th), who has had another fantastically consistent season, and Darren License (52:39, 1,117th), who showed terrific commitment in running despite having worked all morning, wrapped things up for the club. This put the Stratford men in an excellent position as they finished 42nd out of the 99 clubs to complete a team of 6, finishing well in front of local rivals Kenilworth and Leamington, although they did only just finish ahead of the pair in the 9-to-count table. Leeds AC narrowly beat Notts AC to the team title with Tom Humphries (Cannock & Stafford) a clear winner in the individual stakes, and it seems like only yesterday that the Stratford males were battling against him in Division 3 of the Birmingham League!