

The penultimate round of cross-country fixtures saw Stratford AC's senior squads cement their hard-earned positions from the first two meetings. The men and women were both running at the same venue, a somewhat damp Cofton Park in south-west Birmingham, and each other's encouragement helped push the males into second place in their Birmingham XC League Division 3 fixture and the females into 11<sup>th</sup> place in the Midlands Women's XC League. With Joe Brocklehurst and Steve Marshall providing an incredible one-two for the club the only slight disappointment on an otherwise successful afternoon was the club didn't manage to get a complete veteran women's team round, since they had been handily placed in the silver medal position before the race.

The course, opposite the sadly quiet ex-Rover factory in Longbridge, contains all the challenges that a great XC course should present and was the venue for the 2006 National XC Championships which, like this fixture, was splendidly organised by Bournville Harriers. The rain which had hardly let up in the preceding week decided to relent slightly as the 136 women set off on the uphill start to their 6K course, and the three Stratford ladies made up in spirit for what they lacked in numbers. Dawn Davies (29:30, 41<sup>st</sup>) did well to keep things together up the main hill before picking people off on the flat and downhill, while the increasingly reliable Emma Bexson (30:57, 55<sup>th</sup>) and Debbie Cooper (31:02, 56<sup>th</sup>) did a great job working off each other throughout, with the latter recording a season's best position. For the trio to finish 11<sup>th</sup> out of the 21 complete teams, and only one place behind the mighty Tipton Harriers, was a tremendous achievement and shows, despite the various absentees on the day, how far the clubs' women have come in the last couple of years.

As the women crossed the line, and put some dry clothes on, the field of 168 men took centre stage, and while some parts of the course were starting to churn up by the third lap of the 10K race generally it stood up well to everything nature could throw at it. Joe (36:20, 1<sup>st</sup>) has been the class act of the division all season, and whilst he preserved his incredible winning record it was very close as Steve (36:23, 2<sup>nd</sup>) pushed him all the way with a terrific run, making sure that Joe could never relax. Rob Minton (38:04, 7<sup>th</sup>) continued his own remarkably consistent results, and now lies fourth in the divisional season's standings despite still not being quite back to full training yet, to give Stratford three in the top seven. With six to count the pressure was on for the boys behind, and although they gave everything they couldn't quite do enough to give this trio the victory that they deserved. Wayne Vickers (41:27, 26<sup>th</sup>), Patrick Taylor (41:35, 28<sup>th</sup>) and Keith Hawkes (41:55, 30<sup>th</sup>) all battled away manfully, but couldn't keep enough Bournville runners behind them to knock them into second place. Patrick especially has been a revelation for the team this year when available – not bad for a rower who runs occasionally to keep fit and who's been carrying a leg injury for two months! This left the A team with 94 points and second place behind the host club, who recorded 61, and means that Stratford have to pick up 100 points on them in the final fixture to win the division. The most important thing though is promotion and the 500-point gap back to 4<sup>th</sup> place in the 17-team division.

The B team received a bit of a knock when Andy Cockerill, who's scored well in his debut XC season, got badly winded after a nasty fall and had to eventually drop out despite trying to battle on. In-form off-road supremo Paul Hawkins (43:32, 55<sup>th</sup>) and multi-sport maestros Robin Corder (43:43, 58<sup>th</sup>) and Pete Evans (45:14, 72<sup>nd</sup>) took up the challenge though, and all had strong runs, but the hilly course did not really suit the speed merchant that is John Turner (47:27, 93<sup>rd</sup>). Martin Lewis (48:10, 99<sup>th</sup>) is another in his debut season and, judging by this impressive performance, is learning

extremely quickly, which left Steve Kirk (48:42, 105<sup>th</sup>) to complete the B team total of 500 points exactly and 3<sup>rd</sup> place on the day. This leaves them in 3<sup>rd</sup> position overall, but a big club turnout for the final fixture could quite easily see them overhaul Dudley Kingswinford above them.

Mark Bullock (49:28, 117<sup>th</sup>) felt slightly guilty about overtaking Phil Marshall (49:28, 118<sup>th</sup>) on the line, but probably not enough to stop him doing the same next time round, while Luke Watkins (53:33, 143<sup>rd</sup>) wrapped things up for the men and whilst doing so kept his overall lead in the divisional standings for best performing junior. So the women head south to Gloucester in February for their final effort of the winter whilst the men go in the opposite direction up to Stafford Common, and this promises to be another muddy one!