

As the cross-country season starts to ease towards a close Stratford AC's junior cross-country squad resumed their record-breaking ways, after a slight blip in the third meeting, with the penultimate West Midlands Young Athletes' League fixture. The competition was being held at Weddington (Nuneaton) with the club fielding an excellent total of 41 runners, despite again being hit by winter illnesses, and the team finished in the marvellous position of 8<sup>th</sup>, which is the best that these youngsters have ever achieved. The course was certainly a wet one, with standing water pretty much everywhere, and each lap consisted of a large (and flat) sports field followed by a ditch filled with deep water, into a hilly field and then back through the ditch again. This was a tough challenge for the competitors, especially as the ditch/stream was worse than those Senneleys Park or Newbold Comyn.

The U11 girls' race saw Imogen Cooper (season's best, 29<sup>th</sup>) have a terrific run considering she's towards the lower end of this age category, Caroline Fury (49<sup>th</sup>) produce another steady run and Imogen North (SB, 74<sup>th</sup>) really picking things up after a lot of early season illnesses. Naomi Jones (87<sup>th</sup>) and Hannah Bexson (88<sup>th</sup>) were competing for the club for the first time, and with both also at the younger end of the age group and physically quite small they came through this experience with top marks! Harriet Flynn (92<sup>nd</sup>) struggled somewhat but did well to finish, and the 678 points the girls accumulated put them at 8<sup>th</sup> on the day and up 3 places overall to a fantastic 7<sup>th</sup> for the season.

Rather aptly Stratford put out an incredible thirteen U13 girls, but unfortunately they were missing their quickest runner (Molly White) missed the start due to traffic problems! This left a consistent run from Cara Williams (38<sup>th</sup>) to lead the girls back, followed by an unwell Chloe Connor (69<sup>th</sup>), who is improving all the time and has done really well in subsequent schools' events, Zoe Young (77<sup>th</sup>) and Rachel Chandler (78<sup>th</sup>). The two Abbies, Brooks (81<sup>st</sup>) and Flynn (84<sup>th</sup>), both shone throughout, Martha Robinson (88<sup>th</sup>) found it tough carrying a knee injury and these three were quickly followed over the line by Hannah Taylor (108<sup>th</sup>) and Millie Pyne (118<sup>th</sup>). Next came season's bests for Kitty Boyes (SB, 119<sup>th</sup>), who has the potential to develop into a very good athlete, and Danielle Brain (SB, 122<sup>nd</sup>), with sterling performances from Ellie Turner (125<sup>th</sup>) and Holly Pyne (130<sup>th</sup>) completing this impressive club showing. The 662 team points ranked them as 10<sup>th</sup> on the day, leaving them in the same position for the season but with Tipton and a few others within touching distance above them.

The next age group up (the U15s) saw an excellent team performance as the girls' 841 points put them up into the dizzy heights of 6<sup>th</sup> place for the meeting. The after effects of flu meant that Zoe Chandler (18<sup>th</sup>) can be very happy with her run, which still leaves her as 10<sup>th</sup> individual for the season, but by the end only 6 seconds separated Zoe from Becky Young (SB, 19<sup>th</sup>) who just looked so strong as she continued to overtake all the way round. Lucy McDermott (SB, 27<sup>th</sup>) and Rhiannon Davis (SB, 62<sup>nd</sup>) both produced season's best showings, and Katie Taylor (38<sup>th</sup>) wasn't too far off either. This highly successful team effort moved them up into 9<sup>th</sup> position for the season.

With Nienke Verwer absent this just left Shaunie Warner (35<sup>th</sup>) to carry the flag for the U17 women, and whilst it really wasn't a course that suited her but she battled along brilliantly and picked a few more off on the second lap. Shaunie's run gleaned 166 points, which was good enough for 14<sup>th</sup> on the day and 11<sup>th</sup> overall.

For the youngest of the males (U11 boys) Fergus Allison (SB, 10<sup>th</sup>) was once again a revelation, and his strong showing all the way round, topped off by an impressive sprint finish, has been rewarded with 9<sup>th</sup> place for the season. Two season's best runs then followed, as Jonathan Fury (SB, 21<sup>st</sup>) and Ianto Davis (SB, 22<sup>nd</sup>) eased in ahead of the fourth counter Oscar Barbour (40<sup>th</sup>). Ben Taylor (48<sup>th</sup>) is improving all the time after a long-lasting chest infection, Matthew Bayliss (SB, 61<sup>st</sup>) worked hard to achieve his SB and George Bowyer (72<sup>nd</sup>) completed the Stratford contingent. The 864 points was another SB, and a magnificent 4<sup>th</sup> on the day leaves them 5<sup>th</sup> overall (and not a million miles off 4<sup>th</sup>) with one fixture to go.

The quartet of U13 boys grouped together really well, with steady runs from Nye Davis (SB, 31<sup>st</sup>), Howard Allison (34<sup>th</sup>), Edward Caswell (38<sup>th</sup>) and a fine debut from Cameron Kirk (42<sup>nd</sup>). With Edward having concentrated more on his swimming lately, and Cameron usually taking his place on the rugby field, these plucky performances gave them a total of 659 points, 9<sup>th</sup> on the day and shooting them up 3 places to 13<sup>th</sup> overall!

Another 4-man Stratford team, this time in the U15 boys' race, also moved up in the season's table – from 13<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> – as their 622 points placed them as the 9<sup>th</sup> team on the day. Jack Allison (SB, 19<sup>th</sup>) has had all sorts of injuries lately, but is at last starting to come right and had a storming run and strong finish, ahead of

Joshua Newman (46<sup>th</sup>) and James Burton (49<sup>th</sup>). This was Fraser Weetman's (68<sup>th</sup>) first outing of the winter, and since he has subsequently broken his arm it will also be his last!

So, this just left the U17 men and, similarly to the women, there was a sole Stratford representative. Sam Taylor (37<sup>th</sup>) finished in the same position as the previous meeting, but was a big improvement on his County Champs showing, and he is another improving all the time. Sam's 164-point haul left the team as 17<sup>th</sup> for the fixture and 15<sup>th</sup> for the season.

This ever growing and ever more confident squad are still 11<sup>th</sup> overall after this highly encouraging meeting (well ahead of Wolverhampton & Bilston in 12<sup>th</sup>), and are all looking forward to the imminent finale to the season.