

An incredibly tight opening meeting in Division 5 of the Midlands Track & Field League saw Stratford AC's senior squad finish in 3rd place, but it was very nearly so much better! With 2 promoted and 2 relegated teams in the 6-club divisions it's always a bit of a mystery at the start of the season as to what the standard of competition will be like, but with many performances more than capable of winning events at least 2 or 3 divisions higher then the battle for the top 2 places is bound to be a fierce one.

A pleasant day at Solihull saw both the Stratford men and women produce very similar showings, with a host of tremendous performances on the track and points much harder to come by in the field (despite the best efforts of Imogen Green, Sarah Bland, Chris Bartlett and Graham Black). Imogen and Sarah picked up great points in the javelin (28:62m 2A, 19:34m 3B) and high jump (1:50m 3A, 1:35m 2B), there was a storming win for Sarah in the pole vault (1:80m) and the pair were joined by Emma Bexson for further valiant showings in the shot, hammer and discus, but there were only so many events that they could cover, and the result of that was a disappointing total of 4 points out of a possible 32 in the long and triple jumps. When the bigger picture is looked at though, Stratford's women's team continues to go from strength to strength, and for them to hold their own in this sort of level of competition would have been unimaginable even 2 years ago.

The gentle giants that are Chris and Graham saw the latter hold his nerve in the hammer to record a safe 24:09m (4A) with his final - and only legal - throw, while the multi-talented Chris came 1st in the triple jump (12:53m), 2nd in the long jump (6:07m) and 3rd in the high jump (1:80m). Pretty impressive given that he was just returning from a long lay-off. With Neil Hawkins (2:25m 4A) and Charlie Burn (2:25m 2B) producing heroics in the pole vault, and Dan Wright (11:06m 1B), Ed Mills (4:71m 3B) and Rob Minton (1:50m 4B) ably supporting Chris in the triple, long and high jumps respectively, this just left the shot, discus and javelin for the Stratford males to negotiate. Patrick Taylor had a few procedural lapses of memory in the discus, but threw well in the javelin (32:91 6A) and shot (5B), while the veteran Henry Lowry managed to strap up everything that could be strapped up to provide an invaluable contribution in the shot (7:60m 6A).

For the Stratford field officials - many thanks to Lucy Titcomb, Sandy Green and Karen Taylor - it was difficult to concentrate at times, because almost every race on the track witnessed something special from a Stratford athlete. For the women Katie Taylor (63:1 1B), having already filled in well in the long jump, caused much excitement by storming through at the end of the 400m for a magnificent PB, while Emma Titcomb also made people sit up and watch in the 400m hurdles (68:7 1A) - a fantastic new club record - and 100m hurdles (16:4 2A). This pair then filled in valiantly in the 100m, not their best events, with Emma (13:7) finishing as 4A and Katie (14:2) 4B. Emma Bexson unbelievably came 2nd in the B sprint hurdles, only 6 days after pushing her body to the limit in the London Marathon, and the ever-energetic Sarah Bland (76:4 3B) was a very capable understudy in the 1-lap hurdles.

The middle-distance events saw Nienke Verwer (5:12:5) struggle a little in her first outing of the season but still register 2A in the 1500m, having also competed spiritedly in the 200m (6A), and she was well backed up by Vanessa Crookes (3B), as she did in the 200m (6B). Vanessa also took a tremendous 1st in the B 800m and continues to prove to be a valuable asset to the club. Dawn Davies once again demonstrated great speed stamina with a tough 800m (2:39:1 3A) / 3000m (11:31:8 3A) combination, whilst Emma Bexson's (1B) marathon legs seemed to loosen up slightly as the 3K proved a profitable hunting ground.

The men's track highlights also came thick and fast, with even the sprints proving unusually productive as Andrew Pozzi made an enormous difference. He got 2A in the 100m (11:4) and 3A (22:9) in the 200m, which was probably a little too far for him, and Andrew was superbly supported these events by a flying Neil Hawkins (11:6 1A) and a fast finishing Charlie Burn (23:1 2B), for whom the event was probably a little too short! Neil (50:7) and Charlie (50:9) then stepped up to their more favoured 400m distance and recorded a classy double, while Stratford's two debutants in the 110m hurdles - Dan Wright (20:2 2A) and Ed Mills (22:4 3B) - overcame nerves and rather high obstacles to pick up big points. The pair then moved up to the one-lap version and ran even better with Dan (59:9) and Ed (64:1) getting well deserved 2A and 1B

positions respectively. The hard working Rob Minton managed a clean sweep of the distance events, being the club's A athlete in all of the 800m (2:05:1 4A), 1500m (4:26:3, 3A) and 5000m (16:56:0, 4A), with the latter race notable for GB XC international Tom Humphries (14:48:3) finishing almost 2 minutes ahead of a quality field. The B athlete in the 800m was Jack McMullen (2:10:9 PB 2B), who looks so much stronger this season, and in the 1500m Sam Taylor (4:48:9 5B) did the honours, hanging in there really well against quality opposition. Tony Jackson (8:02:00 PB 5A) has started preparing for races in a much more structured manner, and this certainly paid off as (apart from the first water jump) he looked much more at home in the 2000m steeplechase.

All the way through it had been neck and neck at the top between Stratford and Leamington, who seem rejuvenated after their relegation last year, so seemingly it all came down to the final relays. Stratford's women came 4th in both the 4x100m (55:0) and the 4x400m (4:30:5), with the two Emma's, Katie Taylor and Nienke producing a great team effort and a new club record in the latter, and the men nearly did the same in their 4x100m as they came 2nd (45:5), and then also finished excellent runners-up in the 4-lapper (3:32:1). The team knew they had given everything, but with Leamington winning 3 of the 4 relays it seemed certain that they would top the table. It was all so tight though that in fact Cannock & Stafford came through right at the death to snatch it with Leamington, who took 2nd because of more wins, and Stratford finishing equal on points just behind. The old adage of every point counting had never been truer!

A terrific team performance from the Stratford folk had been well backed up by timekeeper John Turner and track judge Daphne Hawkins, but it is the team managers who must get a special mention. Even by their standards, and ignoring all the pre-event organising, this was still a momentous effort. Thankfully Sarah Bland was restricted by the new regulations limiting her to a mere 7 events, but still nonchalantly chalked up club records in the pole vault and hammer! Paul Hawkins, one week on from the Stratford Marathon and supposedly no longer required to compete, picked up vital points in the steeplechase (3B), the 5K (5B) and the hammer (6B) as well as coping with the constant juggling of team resources. Hopefully the second fixture at Leamington will be as exciting as this, but with a slightly different result!