

After the joys of Birmingham and the county championships comes the Midlands equivalent, staged a bit further north at Mansfield and with a healthy selection of Stratford AC runners there to represent the club. Whilst this was certainly not a repeat of the highly successful set of results at the Warwickshire event, partly due to the big step up in quality and partly due to fewer Stratford athletes taking part, those that were there ran hard and did the club proud.

Berry Hill Park was a fine venue for this popular meeting, providing a stern test on an undulating and twisting course which contained a good mixture of mud and firmer ground, and which continually made the athletes think about their line of attack. The event was very well organised by Mansfield Harriers and they were rewarded with perfect weather conditions of cool and calm, with the odd bright bit of sunshine just to cheer the soul!

The females in the club yet again led the way in both numbers and performances, and with no U11 category at this level it was left to the U13 girls to get the ball rolling. This they did splendidly, managing to get a full quartet across the finish line and be placed 13<sup>th</sup>, just behind Rugby & Northampton with the home club taking the main honours. In this 1-lap 3K event Molly White (53<sup>rd</sup>) managed to suppress her pre-race nerves to yet again run superbly well, with Rachel Chandler (76<sup>th</sup>) and Zoe Young (14:20, 93<sup>rd</sup>) running closely to each other most of the time before the former pulled away in the latter stages. Hannah Taylor (15:03, 107<sup>th</sup>) struggled a little on what was a tough course for this age-group, but by battling on meant that the club got a team score of 329 points.

The U15 females then proceeded to get even higher than their U13 counterparts, as a fine total of 185 points saw them sandwiched between the big guns of Bristol and Charnwood in 10<sup>th</sup> place! Zoe Chandler (17:15, 29<sup>th</sup>) impressed everyone as she was almost back to her best after illness, Lucy McDermott (17:41, 38<sup>th</sup>) picked up a hatful of places during the second-half of this 2-lap 3.8K challenge but Becky Young (17:51, 44<sup>th</sup>) suffered somewhat due to stomach problems. Katie Taylor (19:20, 74<sup>th</sup>) kept going really well to complete the team score, with Halesowen taking the first slot and 101 runners managing to complete the full distance.

The 4.8K U17s race was always going to be a long and tough one for Shaunie Warner (25:30, 64<sup>th</sup>), but she was actually passing people on the second (and last) lap – a great testament to her strength and fitness. In an exciting finish Leicester Coritanians and Rugby & Northampton both had 39 points, but the former took in on highest placed finisher.

For the junior males Jack Allison (15:53, 54<sup>th</sup>) had another fine run in the U15s, crossing the line well up amongst the 125 finishers, as he looked very strong throughout and just seems to keep improving as the season progresses. In the next age group along, the U17s, Sam Taylor (23:47, 61<sup>st</sup>) looked a lot more like his usual self and consequently performed admirably amongst a very high-quality field.

Stratford's senior women seem to be able to do no wrong this winter, and once again they gathered a few notable scalps as by finishing as 9<sup>th</sup> team in this very large Midlands region (Charnwood romped it with Bristol 2<sup>nd</sup>). They did this despite only having the minimum four runners present, but consistency was the key again as they all tried to work off one another and keep each other in sight for as long as possible. Sarah Bland (34:05, 51<sup>st</sup>) didn't let the pressure of team leader get to her as she flew round in a beautifully controlled effort, especially through the wooded areas, although she could never quite shake off Emma Bexson (34:58, 59<sup>th</sup>) who has got stronger race by race this season in her usual quiet way. Alison Bagnall (35:29, 64<sup>th</sup>) floated her way over the mud to keep in contact with the front pair, which just left Vanessa Crookes (37:08, 85<sup>th</sup>) to complete the scoring amongst the field of 147. The South African dynamo has proved a valuable asset to the club this winter, despite minimal training due to a long-term foot injury, although she had to move fairly sharpish at the finish not to get trampled on by the charge of the 309-strong senior men's start!

Amongst this usual bunfight start were, again, the minimum number of Stratford members required to complete a team (in this case 6). In a season where they have put out nearly 30 senior males in league meetings this may seem slightly disappointing, but in fact this is really just a no-pressure fixture for most as the league and County Championships are the more serious appointments. The 11.3K distance was of 4 equal laps, with a tough uphill start and finish included for good measure, and the front pair of Keith Hawkes (46:59, 154<sup>th</sup>) and Patrick Taylor (47:49, 170<sup>th</sup>) soon settled into running together before the latter's injury-ridden lack of training started to show in the latter stages. James Deacon (52:31, 237<sup>th</sup>) had enough power in his legs to produce another cracking performance, pulling steadily clear of Phil Howell (53:38, 249<sup>th</sup>) and also flying down the finishing straight. John Turner (53:51, 250<sup>th</sup>) also had Phil in his sights, but

despite giving everything couldn't quite stay with him, while fellow retiree Roger Wilson (55:07, 262<sup>nd</sup>) showed that he's heading the right way back towards full fitness with a highly encouraging outing. This left the Stratford strollers with 1,322 points, and good enough to claim 16<sup>th</sup> team, with Tipton winning this Midlands title from Bristol & West. Paul Hawkins did a magnificent job in co-ordinating everything during a long day, especially since he was highly frustrated at not being able to run due to a calf injury, and generally everyone got what they wanted out of the event – the club got to show its face and perform well at a high-class championship, and the runners got great competition on an outstanding course.