

The climax of the regional cross-country season has rather got swamped in the usual spring-time rush of road races, but for both Stratford AC's junior and senior men's squads the final fixtures confirmed their progress over the winter.

The juniors have gone from strength to strength this winter, and in the space of a few years have gone from almost nothing to finishing 11<sup>th</sup> for the season (out of 20 clubs) in the West Midlands Young Athletes XC League. Another good showing in the fifth and final meeting at Perry Park (Birmingham) saw the squad finish above some prestigious names, and already they have their sights set for next year on the clutch of clubs who finished just above them. The course itself is an undulating parkland one, and for a change conditions were quite firm underfoot with dry, warm weather to match!

U11 girls: Madelaine Briggs (38<sup>th</sup>), Sophie Connor (56<sup>th</sup>), Caroline Fury (66<sup>th</sup>), Imogen North (77<sup>th</sup>), Hannah Bexson (86<sup>th</sup>), Harriet Flynn (89<sup>th</sup>). A steady set of performances saw the girls finish 9<sup>th</sup> on the day and an excellent 7<sup>th</sup> overall.

U13 girls: Molly White (21<sup>st</sup>, season's best), Rachel Chandler (48<sup>th</sup>, SB), Chloe Connor (52<sup>nd</sup>), Abbie Brooks (54<sup>th</sup>, SB), Abbie Flynn (63<sup>rd</sup>, SB), Rachel Jones (65<sup>th</sup>), Martha Robinson (66<sup>th</sup>), Zoe Young (70<sup>th</sup>, SB), Kitty Boyes (104<sup>th</sup>, SB), Millie Pyne (114<sup>th</sup>), Holly Pyne (118<sup>th</sup>), Danielle Brain (120<sup>th</sup>, SB). Another great turnout of 13 helped the team to a season's highest total of 767 points, 8<sup>th</sup> on the day and 9<sup>th</sup> overall.

U15 girls: Zoe Chandler (5<sup>th</sup>, SB), Becky Young (20<sup>th</sup>), Lucy McDermott (24<sup>th</sup>, SB), Katie Taylor (27<sup>th</sup>, SB). Some excellent outings here, especially for Zoe who achieved her highest ever placing and was ranked 8<sup>th</sup> best individual for the season. The team finished 7<sup>th</sup> for the fixture and 8<sup>th</sup> for the season. (Over at Leamington the final Gloucester XC League fixture saw Zoe - first year U15 - show more good form by winning the combined U15/U17 race by about 50m.)

U17 women: Nienke Verwer (3<sup>rd</sup>), Shaunie Warner (45<sup>th</sup>). Nienke's terrific showing equalled her own club record for the highest position achieved in this league, and this helped the duo to a 9<sup>th</sup> on the day / 10<sup>th</sup> overall team result.

U11 boys: Fergus Allison (6<sup>th</sup>), Jonathan Fury (21<sup>st</sup>), Alex Eves (39<sup>th</sup>), Ben Taylor (45<sup>th</sup>), Matthew Bayliss (62<sup>nd</sup>), George Bowyer (75<sup>th</sup>). The youngest of the boys' squads did the best of all the Stratford teams as they finished the season in a magnificent 5<sup>th</sup> place (7<sup>th</sup> on the day), capped off by Fergus achieving his best ever league finish which also put him as 8<sup>th</sup> individual for the series.

The rest of the boys' teams were a little smaller but no less determined: U13s - Howard Allison (44<sup>th</sup>) and Patrick Eves (72<sup>nd</sup>), U15s - James Burton (52<sup>nd</sup>), U17s - Sam Taylor (31<sup>st</sup>). This left them in 13<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> overall positions respectively, and all greatly helped the club to finish 9<sup>th</sup> on when all the individual age groups were totted up. The team was once again given invaluable support by Karen Taylor, and with team manager Paul Hawkins' organisational and coaching skills coming to the fore once more, it was another highly positive winter for the youngsters.

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Lucy McDermott has also been showing great versatility by winning a couple of early season track races. As an U15 she triumphed in an 800m in Nottingham with a time of 2 minutes 28 seconds (her PB and the senior club record is 2.25), and then Lucy followed this up with a win on her 1200m debut at Stourport in 4 minutes 0:2 seconds.

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Amongst the senior men the aim was for a season of consolidation after last winter's promotion to Division 2 of the highly rated Birmingham XC League, and this was comfortably achieved courtesy of a 13<sup>th</sup> placed finish in their last meeting. This left them in a highly satisfying 9<sup>th</sup> position for the season in the 18-club division; a fine achievement given that their highest counters from last year – Joe Brocklehurst and Steve Marshall – did not feature at all. There was another impressive turnout of 21 for this fixture at Coundon Park in north-west Coventry, which is again a fitting testament to the enormous organisational effort undertaken by team manager Paul Hawkins, who must never sleep in order to fit everything into his average day! The 10k course was a 3-lapper, with some twisty, technical sections mixed in with a lot of standing water (and mud), but the cool weather conditions were ideal for XC running.

The A team counters were: Rob Minton (40:44, 37<sup>th</sup>), Johann Breytenbach (42:31, 59<sup>th</sup>), Keith Hawkes (43:59, 81<sup>st</sup>), Steve Donnelly (44:08, 84<sup>th</sup>), Malcolm Bowyer (44:30, 94<sup>th</sup>) and Paddy Taylor (44:41, 98<sup>th</sup>), which totalled up to 453 points. Rob and Johann have done a fantastic job leading the line all season, never complaining even when not on form, while Paddy has proved to be a tremendous club man, turning out and flying round despite no training due to an on-going sciatic nerve problem.

The B team had another great year as the 928 points amassed at Coundon left them in 6<sup>th</sup> place for the season, and the club's strength in these middle positions has really benefited the A team by continually pushing other team's counters down the rankings. The counters for this final fixture were: Andy Cockerill (47:09, 142<sup>nd</sup>), Ian Thornett (47:54, 149<sup>th</sup>), Brian Thornett (47:59, 150<sup>th</sup>), Pete Walton (49:09, 159<sup>th</sup>), James Deacon (49:21, 163<sup>rd</sup>) and Steve Kirk (49:40, 165<sup>th</sup>). Andy Cockerill especially has had a storming winter, with his consistent running proving to be an invaluable back-up for the A team, while it's been tremendous fun watching the Thornett's try and run each other into the ground!

The order of the other 9, all of whom apart from the final pair finished above an A team counter, was: Roger Wilson (49:47, 168<sup>th</sup>), John Turner (49:53, 170<sup>th</sup>), Dave Wolstencroft (50:29, 173<sup>rd</sup>), Paul Hawkins (50:35, 175<sup>th</sup>), Pete Hill (51:19, 180<sup>th</sup>), Phil Marshall (52:55, 189<sup>th</sup>), Phil Howell (53:01, 190<sup>th</sup>), Luke Watkins (55:50, 199<sup>th</sup>) and Andy Turner (57:41, 206<sup>th</sup>). Many of these have proved to be the backbone of the squad this season, with special mentions for Dave Wolstencroft and Andy Turner for managing to put together a string of consistent performances in not always easy circumstances. City of Stoke, Wolverhampton & Bilston and Bournville all got promoted while West Bromwich, Leamington and Newcastle (Staffs) were relegated.