

The National Triathlon Club Relays at Nottingham are one of the most enjoyable events of the summer, but each year seems to witness a steady increase in the quality of competitor taking part. Stratford AC contains a keen group of triathletes and each year they battle away to hold their own against the vast majority of tri-specific clubs present, and this year was no exception as the two teams both took large chunks off their 2008 times for the same course but still finished further down the field. Staged as usual within the confines of the National Watersports Centre at Holme Pierrepont (Nottingham) the event is always bordering on delightful chaos, as 452 teams containing 1800 athletes do battle over a tight 400m swim, 15K bike and 5K run course.

Disaster nearly struck the club's A team when Emma Bexson had to drop out on the morning of the event with what later turned out to be meningitis. Stratford's Heather Rees, already competing in the afternoon for her sponsor's team (Sportstest) amazingly agreed at 6a.m. to fill in for the club in the morning session. The teams were led off on that difficult first mass swim leg by Debbie Cooper and Phil Howell, both of whom have improved their swimming significantly in the last 12 months and both of whom know how to look after themselves! Andy List picked an interesting time for his first ever open-water swim, but hung on in there well as the B team's leg 2, and with Heather and Vanessa Crookes putting in very strong swims for the respective leg 3's things were looking good as the quartets headed off on the bikes. With the A team having such phenomenal cyclists such as Debbie and Pete Evans going first and last, and the B's Andy List and James Deacon flying along, the two crews continued to more than hold their own. Heading around the lake on the 5K run laps Keith Hawkes and Phil Howell managed to pace off each other well to set respectable times, and the eventual result of all this huffing and puffing were total team times of 3 hours 43:25 and 4:09:29. This ranked the A's as the 30<sup>th</sup> mixed team, with the B team also well placed in the open category – results that are genuinely impressive given the standard of competition, and for which team manager Steve Kirk must take an enormous amount of credit.

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Emma Bexson has had an interesting summer. Two World Sprint Champs qualifiers - May's Grendon Sprint and June's National Sprint Champs at Milton Keynes – saw her finish an excellent 19<sup>th</sup> in her age category in both and get into the GB team for this month's outing to Australia, but the aforementioned meningitis then cruelly put paid to that trip. Before her illness Emma also took part in the Hyde Park sprint tri, which will be the course for the London 2012 triathlon, finishing a fantastic 26<sup>th</sup> female (out of 139), and since she came 7<sup>th</sup> in her age category has already qualified for next year's world's! Hopefully that will partly make up for the bitter disappointment of this year.

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Two others from Stratford AC who gained terrific qualification slots from Milton Keynes were Pete Evans and Debbie Cooper, both of whom have already proved themselves to be more than competent international age-group triathletes. On a miserably wet and cold morning, Pete (13:20/30:31/20:51) set the fastest bike leg in his age category to finish 47<sup>th</sup> overall and 11<sup>th</sup> in that category, whilst Debbie (12:53/35:20/24:26) was a marvellous 2<sup>nd</sup> in her group and therefore picked up a nice medal in the process. Neither will be taking up their places though, since Debbie's ongoing achilles problems are still an issue and Pete has plumped for the World Duathlon Champs in the States instead. How nice to have a choice of world championships!

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SAC's Vanessa Crookes was determined to make the gigantic leap from sprint tri's to half-ironmans in a very short space of time, and Saturday's Vitruvian event at Rutland Water saw her complete this difficult journey in terrific style. This beautifully organised event is one of the largest and most popular in the country, and since it doubles up as the British Middle-Distance Championships it not only sells out its 1000 places months in advance, but it also contains a glut of quality triathletes. On a dry but breezy day the South African import dug deep into her renown stamina reserves to complete the course in a magnificent time of 6 hours 19:27 minutes. The still and clean waters of the vast reservoir saw Vanessa come out of the 2-lap 1900m swim after 38:16 minutes, testament to all her recent hard work in this discipline, before heading out on the 2-lap 56-mile bike. No-one would ever argue that this was her strongest suit, especially given the hills of the Rutland Ripple and an increasing headwind, but it was only in the last few miles that she started to struggle in recording a respectable 3 hours 37:08 split. Back into her comfort zone for the 2-lap half-marathon run across the dam, Vanessa started to fly past a number of those who had the audacity to go past her on the bike, and a 1 hour 58:11 run at the end of this demanding event is something that she can be very

proud of. Heather Rees again showed her class with a 5:14:33 finish, made even more impressive by the fact that she completed her first ever half-marathon (in 1:50:49) on the back of limited run training!

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The gods were so determined that Sarah Odell shouldn't be unleashed onto the world of triathlon that back in May they infected Bilton Grange School (Dunchurch), on the outskirts of Rugby, with swine flu so that their women only tri had to be cancelled. The redoubtable Mrs Odell is not one to be easily put off though and her tri debut recently took place at the same venue, although this time it was a mixed super sprint event. The start, finish, swim and off-road run are all within private enclosed grounds, with the late 18<sup>th</sup> century school as a backdrop, and the cycle route a 20K undulating loop that takes in local villages and Rugby itself. Despite suffering from a bad attack of nerves Sarah had a tremendously impressive start to her tri career, recording an overall time of 1 hour 18:04 (10:20 400m pool swim / 41:09 cycle / 26:35 5K run), feeling very strong on the bike with only the second lap of the run proving slightly difficult. Finishing 162<sup>nd</sup> out of the field of 304 (7<sup>th</sup> F40-49 out of 23), it is easy to see why she is already looking forward to October's Stratford Tri.

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Another Stratford AC member to enjoy a remarkable triathlon debut was Rob Minton, who was placed 19<sup>th</sup> out of 145 in his first ever outing! It's perhaps not surprising that such a naturally talented athlete took to the sport like a triathlete to water, and it will be interesting to see how he does in the future armed with all that he learned this time round. Rob took fellow club members Paddy Davies and Sarah Bland back to his home town of Worcester for the sprint event based at the Top Barn Activity Centre. The run was a standard sprint distance (5K), the swim an open-water 750m and the bike a slightly longer 25K. The boy wonder struggled relatively on the swim (15:18), understandable for your first time in a wetsuit, but then picked up a host of places courtesy of a strong bike (51:44) and the 4<sup>th</sup> quickest run (19:50). Sarah was next back in an overall time of 1:42:00 (14:55 / 60:26 / 24:29), looking very impressive in the water, which put her 71<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in her female veteran category. This left Paddy to complete the totally positive tone for the day as he finished 6<sup>th</sup> male O50 (82<sup>nd</sup> overall) in a time of 1:45:10 (16:41 / 56:12 / 29:52), and like Rob move swiftly up through the field on a strong cycle leg.