

The fourth and final track & field meeting for Stratford AC's seniors ended in a mixture of emotions, as another tight Midlands League Division 5 battle saw their hopes of promotion slip away, but the spectre of relegation (which unexpectedly put in an appearance mid-afternoon) was also banished! If Stratford's experience has been typical then the re-organisation of the league 2 years ago, combining the men's and women's leagues into an 8-division format (each with 6 teams; 2-up, 2-down), has resulted in good quality and highly competitive athletics. Bromsgrove & Redditch tied up the second promotion spot by winning the meeting ahead of champions Cannock & Stafford, with bottom placed Burton being joined by Newport (Wales) despite their late revival in the second-half of the season. Next year Stratford and Leamington will be joined by Corby and Worcester (relegated), and Shrewsbury and Kidderminster & Stourport (promoted).

The fixture was the first time that Stratford had ever hosted a senior match, which was held at Leamington because the high school track doesn't quite have all the required facilities yet e.g. steeplechase pit, and the number of volunteers from throughout the club meant that it all passed off in a successful manner. The Sunday morning started bright and dry after a day of heavy rain previously, although the absentee list once again made unfortunately decisive reading - Nienke Verwer (ill); Charlie Burn, Amanda and Georgie Evans, and Emma Titcombe (all on holiday); Neil Hawkins, Joe Brocklehurst and Dawn Davies (all injured). This was immediately lengthened when Chris Bartlett, one of the squad's mainstays this summer, injured his hamstring in the first jump of the first event, but against this the senior debuts of Bryn Stretton and Alice Hale proved major successes. Bryn won the A long jump with a very impressive PB of 6:29m, while Alice looked full of potential as she got 5A in both the 100m and 200m, and they both contributed fast legs in the sprint relays. With Katie Taylor following a PB in the 800m (2:34:7,5A) by injuring her back in the first round of the triple jump (both no scoring and having to miss the 400m and relays), it would have been easy for heads to drop, but nothing could have been further from the truth as this spirited group just adapted and redoubled their efforts.

Andrew Pozzi filled in admirably for Chris in the triple jump, and along with Joe Donaghue they promptly won A and B with 12:76m and 11:39m respectively, and although it wasn't quite so easy to replace Chris in the high jump, Joe (5A) and Rob Minton (2=B) still picked up good points. Elsewhere in the field things were going just as well, as the pole vault witnessed fantastic 2nd places for Joe (A) and the multi-talented event debutant Rob Minton (B), James Chamberlain (46:22m) won the javelin and Paddy Taylor threw an impressive 36:25m PB for 2B, James and Joe threw well in the discus and the hammer resulted in an SB from Graham Black (32:10,2A) and a PB from Henry Lowry (19:06,3B). Henry has been a large and unexpected bonus this season, with his hard work on improving technique paying real dividends for the club.

The highlights in the field for the Stratford women, apart from such spectacular pairings as Emma Bexson and Helen Evans in the discus, were Jemma Lane winning the B high jump (1:40m) in only her second senior appearance, Sarah Bland winning the A pole vault (1:90m) and Imogen Green (30:74m,2A) and Sarah (20:90m,3B) harvesting big points in the javelin. It can not be emphasised enough how impressive it was that so many of the Stratford females abandoned their comfort zones in order to fill all these field events, with Sarah Bland providing both the backbone and the organisation.

The track saw the long awaited debut of Andrew Pozzi over the senior heights for the 110m hurdles, and he certainly didn't disappoint as he recorded an electric 14:8 seconds, smashing the previous divisional record (17:2) and nearly breaking the league record (14:7)! Pozzi also got 2nd in the 100m flat (11:1), and with Dan Wright doing superbly in both the sprint (1B) and 400m hurdles (1A), as well as the 200m (4A), then the shorter races all saw good points for Stratford. Ed Mills got off to a good start in the 400m hurdles (2B) before the effects of the previous night caught up with him, while Rob Minton, Sam Taylor and Jack Allison all battled manfully against

the odds in the middle-distance events. Dan Lynch (3B) looked very comfortable as he ran strongly in the 3000m, with Malcolm Bowyer (5A) and Tony Jackson (4B) giving their all in the same distance over jumps and water.

For the women, Natasha Gordon came back for another taste of the bright lights and proved to be an ideal foil for Alice in the sprints (as well as throwing a shot a surprisingly long way), with Sharnie Warner joining Emma Bexson and Helen Evans in the middle-distance madness. The solar-powered pairing of Bland and Bexson did brilliantly over both the sprint and one-lap jumps, Alison Bagnall (5:39:4,4A) was competitive all the way to the finish of a warm 1500m and then ran an even warmer 3000m (4A) as she teamed up with Helen Evans (3B).

Four fairly makeshift Stratford teams lined up for the relays, but some highly gutsy running from very tired legs was duly rewarded with decent points, especially the men's 4x100m quartet (46:5,3rd). So when the final results were read out the team finished 5th on the day and 4th for the season – a fine achievement in the circumstances that all those who contributed to can be proud of. There was certainly a sense of what might have been for the Stratford attendees still present, but also an eagerness to start planning for next year as soon as possible.

While the emphasis is very much on a team ethos in this competition, it was interesting to note what the individual contributions made over the season had been in this division. The ever willing Rob Minton (85.5) was third highest scorer amongst all the males, with Chris Bartlett (74) in seventh despite his unfortunate day, while Emma Bexson's (67) contribution to the team's fortunes was highlighted with her excellent ninth amongst the women. By far the highest points total in the whole division though was gleaned by Sarah Bland. A massive total of 140 gives only a hint of what a remarkable athlete Sarah is, especially when she is having to put such a large amount of effort into organising others at the same time. The men's team manager - Paul Hawkins - got 11 points, which is rubbish.

There have been a large number of individuals who have either given their effort, time and advice throughout the year to assist the Stratford cause, especially for this inaugural hosting by the club, but officials such as John Turner, Daphne Hawkins, Lucy Titcombe, Sandy Green and Pete Law have been invaluable, and of course Paul Hawkins and Sarah Bland have gone way beyond what is expected from any mere mortals!