

Stratford AC's senior track & field team managers have produced rabbits from hats on many occasions in recent years, but even they could not overcome the loss of so many key figures for their penultimate Midlands League meeting and the squad's promotion hopes took a bit of a dent. Paul Hawkins and Sarah Bland begged, bribed and blackmailed to cover holidays, injuries, work, illness, exams and even international call-ups, but the team finished 5th on the day and this moved them down into 3rd overall and narrowly outside the two promotion slots. The one thing that did stand out though was the remarkably resilient attitude of those that were there and competing.

On the women's side of things a team of just six managed to get points in every single event, which was a tremendous effort and ensured a master class in damage limitation! Desperate times call for desperate measures and Zoe Chandler, who was there supporting mum but is just under the league's age requirements, ran in the 3K and won it in brilliant style, but was then disqualified after the age discrepancy was pointed out to the track referee by one of the other clubs. Zoe will be a massive asset to the squad next year, when she will be old enough to compete at senior level. Alison Bagnall certainly ensured that the points haul from the family was a productive one though, as she looked strong throughout the tough double of 1500m (3A) and 3000m (4A).

Natasha Gordon made an unexpected debut for the club, but proved to be a real find by showing that she's not just an excellent rower! Tash was dropped into the javelin (5B) at late notice but showed a fine throwing arm, continued this in the 200m (6A) and then looked really good in the high jump (4B), despite having to interrupt it for the 100m (6A) with the bar just too high for her when she returned. Annabel Richardson had to miss her favourite throw, the javelin, but more than made up for it in the shot putt (6A) and discus (6A), whilst great credit must go to the ever-hardy Katie Taylor who did both the long jump (6A) and 400m (3A) - and last leg of the 4x400m - when in a great deal of pain due to a bad hip.

This then just left the odd 21 slots to fill - a job that was carried out by Sarah Bland, Emma Bexson and Vanessa Crookes with admirable good humour and no little stamina and skill. For someone who was surplus to requirements the day before, the changing circumstances meant that Vanessa willingly swapped a Saturday afternoon in the bookmakers for a day out in Burton-on-Trent competing in the shot putt (5B), 100m (6B), 200m (6B), 400m (6B), 800m (5B), 1500m (3B) and a relay! The inexhaustible Emma matched this with long jump (3B), triple jump (4B), discus (6B), hammer (4B), 100m hurdles (3B), 400m hurdles (3B) and 800m (5A), whilst Sarah Bland managed pole vault (2A=, equalling club record of 1:90m), triple jump (3A), high jump (2A), hammer (4B, 22:12m club record), javelin (4A), 100m hurdles (4A), 400m hurdles (4A) - a tremendous set of quality results given that she was also constantly having to juggle resources.

The Stratford males did at least have a larger gene pool to select from, although victories were still tough to come by, with Chris Bartlett's quality double in the long jump (6:74m, PB) and triple jump (14:05m) being the only A string victories of the day for the club. Even with a slight following wind it is obvious that Chris is starting to produce the sort of performances again that his torn quad put a stop to last year, and a 2nd in the high jump (1:80m) only underlined his importance to the team. Also in the field Joe Donaghue went about his business in his usual modest, unassuming manner, winning the B triple jump and coming 2nd A with a fine series of pole vaults (2:90m, PB), as well as showing his decathlete background with valuable points in the discus (6A) and javelin (5A). Graham Black showed why he prefers his lumps of rock with a piece of wire on the end, rather than without one, as he followed his finest demonstration of hammer throwing (31:25m, 2A) for a few years with not doing quite so well in the shot (5B). Henry Lowry once again proved to be worth his weight in gold, which is no mean feat these days, as he provided fantastic back-up in the hammer (3B, PB), discus (4B), shot (6A) and javelin (6B) - the first three of which he continues to improve at as he realises that they are disciplines that he can do really well in.

Out on the track the males also had a couple of debutants in Jack Allison, who has worked his way up through the club's junior ranks, and Dan Lynch, who has recently joined the club on the road running and triathlon side. Jack produced a more than creditable performance in the 800m (4B), notching a marvellous PB, while Dan had the excellent bonus of a victory (1B) in his first track appearance as he recorded 19:03

minutes in a hot 5K. Tony Jackson is starting to become a bit of a specialist over the jumps, with the old racehorse picking up a glut of points via a fine 2K steeplechase (2B) and a couple of valiant efforts in the 400m hurdles (6B) and 110m hurdles (5B, PB by 5 seconds!). Malcolm Bowyer was the A string in the steeplechase, just ahead of Tony, and he completed a profitable event for the club with a 3rd before joining Paul Hawkins for a spot of extra warm weather training as guests in the 5K! The A string in the 5K was another pillar of the current team, Rob Minton, and his 4th was all the more impressive given that he was in no-man's land between the first three and the pack for most of the 12 gruelling laps. Rob also gleaned a hatful of points from the high jump (4B=), 1500m (5A), 110m hurdles (5A) and 400m hurdles (4A). Sam Taylor was the B runner in the 1500m and picked up a good 4th place in spite of setting off a little too fast, a problem Jack McMullen (6A) definitely had in a similarly fierce 800m race.

The shorter distances on the track went much more according to plan with Charlie Burn and Dan Wright looking stronger and stronger as the distances increased. In the 100m Charlie (6A) struggled a little, although Dan (2B) more than held his own, but in the 200m Charlie took 3rd in the A's and Dan pulled out another terrific second place. The times for the A 400m may not have been spectacular, but it was an intriguing race all the way as Charlie came 2nd in a 3-man dip for the line, while Dan completed a phenomenal trio of PB races with an enjoyably clear victory in the B event. Dan's bad back prevented him from hurdling so that was an even more impressive effort! With some very tired Stratford bodies dragging themselves and an increasingly heavy baton around in the relays, they just managed to do enough to hold the home town club (Burton) off in the final reckoning. This may well prove vital come August's fourth and final meeting in Leamington which Stratford will host (the High School track does not have facilities such as the steeplechase pit, etc), but to make up the 2.5 match point lead on second placed Bromsgrove & Redditch the club knows that everyone will have to come out with all guns blazing!