

Those on the inside of Stratford AC have known for a while that they have a once-in-a-lifetime crop of golden oldies, and national recognition in the last few weeks has rather let the cat out of the bag. There are half-a-dozen males in the club who are above or around that 65-years of age mark, and who regularly put much younger runners to shame, and a couple of these have recently won medals in national road running championships.

Phil Brennan and John Turner, along with son Andy, set off in the dark and made the long journey down to Hertfordshire for the Stevenage Half-Marathon, and along with their county championships this included the British Masters Athletics Federation national half-marathon championships. As the boys queued for their timing chips at Fairlands Valley Spartans' running track the rain was just lashing down, and nothing much had changed by the time the start commenced! The route consisted of two-laps of traffic-free cycle ways, relatively flat with some undulations, and if the weather had relented at all the competitors might have considered the Fairlands Valley stretch to be on the attractive side. There were over 900 entries for this popular event, but with only 674 finishers there were obviously some who were put off by the conditions. None of our intrepid trio had particularly spectacular races, with John suffering from the remnants of a knockout virus, Phil hampered by a painful foot and Andy just couldn't get into his stride. Despite being 10 minutes off his best John (1:39:02,145th) still had the tremendous achievement of picking up a national Masters silver medal in his 65-69 age-group, and to finish 2nd only to Cheltenham's phenomenon Martin Ford is an unbelievable success. Phil (1:49:13,289th) was a little off the pace but hung on in there well, whilst exactly the same could be said of Andy Turner (1:54:57,376th). James Lawler (Bedford & Co) and Sarah Gee (Reading RR) claimed the spoils with times of 1:09:55 and 1:19:53 respectively, and not even the fact that the rain stopped and the sun came out as soon as they had finished could wipe the large smile off John's face! As a really nice touch, those remarkable Stratford athletes Mick and Phil Curry were presented with a special award since it was their 200th half-marathon together – identical plaques, one inscribed 'Mick and Phil' and the other 'Phil and Mick'.

Phil Brennan got his richly deserved moment of national glory in the equivalent BMAF 10-mile championships, but he had to travel even further to achieve it – Portland in Dorset (near Weymouth). This event was contested in one of the most picturesque areas of England; Portland is an isle connected by a causeway (Chesil Beach) and although very scenic it is also very exposed to the English Channel. To complete their 10 miles the runners did one small and then one larger lap, as well as an out-and-back trip to the famous lighthouse at Portland Bill, and with only 6 runners beating the hour-mark the course was as tough as they come. John Turner would probably not have enjoyed the 1000ft of ascent, the continuous climbs between miles 2 – 4 and 8 – 10 and the long steep descents, so it was just as well that he couldn't make it!

Although Phil generally struggled because of injury, and again his time of 79:37 minutes was well off where he usually is, his great determination pulled him round to the momentous prize of a national bronze medal (in that 65-69 category). With Martin Ford again comfortably taking gold, the Oxhill flyer can be mightily satisfied with 3rd amongst such illustrious company, especially on a day when he generally felt pretty awful. These are halcyon days indeed for the golden generation of Stratford!

One of the younger pups of the SAC seniors has also been doing a bit of travelling, as James Deacon headed down to London for the Royal Parks Half-Marathon. The event only started last year, to provide a race that would celebrate the natural history and heritage of the Royal Parks, and proved so popular that it was voted Best New Run of 2008 by the Runner's World readership (there is also a great emphasis on the environmental and charity aspects of road running).

The race's HQ was based in Hyde Park near to the Royal Albert Hall, with a large area devoted to various marquees, stalls and an entertainment stage, and with just over 10,000 runners competing everything was organised on a grand scale. These organisers were rewarded for their hard work with ideal weather for running – overcast and still – and this mass of runners were taken on a loop that sent them from Hyde Park to St James' Park (via Buckingham Palace), onto Green Park (via Big Ben), and returning to Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens for the big finish not far from the start.

The ever-enthusiastic James was fairly comfortable for the majority of the race, only fading slightly in the last 2 miles, and he managed to knock a massive 90 seconds off his previous half-marathon PB as he notched up a very impressive time of 1 hour 35:02 minutes. This well-deserved reward for one of the hardest trainers in the club left him in a lofty 570th position out of this enormous field, and not surprisingly James would recommend it to anyone who fancied an energetic weekend down in London! The overall winner was Paolo Sandali with a time of 1:09:31, and the first female across the line was Natalie Gray in a time of 1:17:39.