

Athletics is generally considered to be a relaxing way to unwind from the stresses and strains of 21st century life, but at the halfway point in Stratford AC's senior track & field team's season things are so tense that their two managers may well be in need of medical help come August! The second fixture, hosted at Leamington this time, followed much the same pattern as the first one, with doubts over the final placings right until the end and Stratford doing very well whilst slightly frustrated that things could have been even better. Cannock & Stafford (373 match points) repeated their narrow win in the first meeting, with Stratford just missing out on second place to Bromsgrove & Redditch courtesy of a nail-biting 369-368 final tally. This leaves Stratford half a league point ahead of B&R, with Leamington another half point further back, in the race for the second promotion place behind current leaders Cannock.

In another good quality meeting the Stratford males had a terrific day in the field, benefiting greatly from the return of a few old faces. Team manager Paul Hawkins did at least let James Chamberlain unpack his case after a year in Australia before enquiring about his availability, and after having not thrown a javelin in all that time James promptly won the A competition with a 45:63m launch! Not only did he also get 3A in the discus and 4A in the shot, but just as importantly it meant that a rather unwell Paddy Taylor with an excellent javelin (3B), Joe Donaghue in the discus (2B) and Henry Lowry in the shot (5B) were then able to pick up a mass of B string points rather than having to bear the burden of being the A athletes. Joe Donaghue and Mal Hawkins were the other welcome returnees in the field, with the former getting 4A from a very slippery pole vault (2:40m) runway – which unfortunately accounted for Charlie Burn - and a precious 1B in the triple jump (11:31m), and Mal giving Chris Bartlett (1A) a run for his money in the long jump as he recorded 6:00m dead to win the B event and finish just 9cm behind his team mate. Mal's painful sinus problems made this effort even more commendable, but did unfortunately rule him out of the high hurdles. In another highly impressive showing Chris also took first in the triple jump (12:87m) and second in the high jump (1:75m).

Stratford's women were no less impressive in the field with two of the team's younger seniors, Amanda and Georgie Evans, producing some outstanding performances alongside some slightly more mature colleagues! Amanda had the better of things in the triple jump (2A 10:40m against 2B 9:84), but Georgie reversed that result in a high jump countback (2A 1:40m against 1B 1:40m). Despite having already competed in an early morning triathlon, which left her badly affected by the cold conditions, Emma Bexson still heroically turned up to compete in the hammer (4B), shot (4B) and discus. Another to glean precious points was the ever unassuming Annabel Richardson, and her hard work on javelin technique really paid off as her PB earned the club a marvellous 2B, and she also came 6A in the discus. With Katie Taylor (3B) doing well in the long jump, despite again struggling with her run-up, this just left team manager Sarah Bland to come up with the goods in the other 5 events! This she did in her own inimitable hi-energy manner with yet more club records in the pole vault (1:90m 3A) and hammer (20:90 5A), as well as highly profitable results in the shot (5A), javelin (5A) and an ever-lengthening long jump performance (4:35m 4A).

The ladies were flying along on the track as well, with the hurdles events proving especially productive. Emma Titcomb (16:0) and Amanda Evans (16:8) gained a clean sweep in the 100m hurdles, with the former's fantastic effort breaking the club's senior record, before Emma repeated the result in the 400m version (69:6) in tandem with that woman Bland (2B) again. Katie Taylor held her own in the 100m (4B), but it was another storming, fast-finishing run in the 400m (63:9 2A) that really caught the eye, whilst Shaunie Warner pulled out all the stops in the 200m (4B) and 400m (5B) on her successful return from a knee injury. Dawn Davies' stress fracture put a big dent into the team's middle-distance strength, but after Nienke Verwer (4:57:9) showed her quality in comfortably winning the 1500m Helen Evans and Vanessa Crookes filled in the gaps with their usual great gusto and determination. On her first appearance in a track meet for more years than would be polite to mention Helen picked up precious points in the 800m (5A) and 3000m (4A), with Vanessa coming home as 3B in both of those as well as in the 1500m.

The Stratford males were also consistently successful on the track, starting off with 2nd places in all four of the 100m and 200m A and B events. Andrew Pozzi was the A athlete in both, and his narrow defeat to a divisional record in the 100m was especially exciting, while having sprinters of the quality of Neil Hawkins

(100m) and Charlie Burn (200m) as your B runners is a real sign of strength in depth. The latter pair also contested the 400m, as a slightly below-par Neil came in 4A and Charlie romped home in the B in 52:4. The male hurdlers nearly matched their female counterparts as Ed Mills (4A) and Tony Jackson (4B), who knocked a second off his PB, contested the short stuff, and Ed (4A) again and Rob Minton (3B) tackled the one-lap version. Onto the middle-distance races and the boy Minton proved yet again that he has both terrific speed stamina and good recovery, as he successfully contested all three of the 800m (3A), 1500m (2A) and 3000m (4A), the latter with Paul Hawkins (6B) as a late replacement for the sickly Paddy Taylor. Paddy had bravely struggled on earlier in the 800m (6B), while in contrast an energetic Sam Taylor (2B) again showed that he is consistently hitting around that 4:40 mark. Two masters of their craft - picked as much for their swimming ability as for their hurdling skills - then took to the track for the 3K steeplechase, with Malcolm Bowyer (4A) and Tony Jackson (3B and big PB) educating as well as entertaining the expectant, and slightly open-mouthed, crowd.

It's been a good few meetings since the concluding relays weren't vital to the Stratford squad and this was certainly no exception, especially as a dodgy PA meant that the exact positions at the top weren't too clear! The women's 4x100m went first and came 5th, before the males got a splendid 2nd in their sprint, leaving it all down to the 4x400m. Again the women went first, and the quartet of Katie Taylor, Shaunie Warner, Sarah Bland and Emma Titcombe were magnificent as they broke the club record with 4:28:8 to grasp an invaluable 3rd spot. If that was exciting then the men's resulted in a number of spontaneous combustions as Bromsgrove & Redditch led for 1599m of the 1600m race. Charlie Burn looked like he had slightly too much to do all the way round his last leg, despite having been kept in there by the last dregs of energy from Ed Mills, Rob Minton and Neil Hawkins, but he paced his final 100m turbo boost to perfection amid much excitement and a 50-second stormer. So it's onto Burton-upon-Trent in July and this merry band know that as long as everyone continues to fight tooth and nail for every point, they can not just get promotion but can still win the division outright.