

One of the first signs of the impending change of seasons is the National Cross-Country Championships, and a Spring-like day greeted those Stratford AC members who ventured down to London for this annual highlight. The event rotates around the regions each year, but such is the quality of the Hampstead course that Parliament Hill is invariably the one chosen for the south. For the first time ever the club had laid on a coach to take the runners and their companions down to the venue, and this all helped to ensure that everyone arrived in a relaxed frame of mind.

Jack Allison (184th) was first off for the club in the U15 boys' event, and he more than held his own in a field of 398 with a fine performance. Even at this early stage in the day it was clear that the hills that gave such a fantastic view over the capital were seriously hard work, and that the natural springs on the Heath kept the mud flowing!

For the U17 women the two Stratford ladies had contrasting fortunes but both can be proud of their efforts. Nienke Verwer (35th) finished in a terrific position and kept going well despite tiring a little in the second-half, whilst this was by far the longest and toughest race that Shaunie Warner (179th) had ever competed in, but she showed tremendous spirit not to let it get to her.

All of Stratford's U13 girls, who were up next, showed similar spirit, with Molly White (225th) continually overtaking throughout the race to lead the local trio back. Hannah Taylor (277th) really impressed by toughing it out to keep Molly in sight, and was consequently rewarded with a good finishing position, while Kitty Boyes (345th) was slightly overawed at her first nationals but also overcame her nerves to run well. The U17 men pairing of Jack McMullen (137th) and Sam Taylor (198th) both paced their efforts beautifully, starting steadily and passing through the field of 285 throughout, with Sam looking especially strong up some killer hills.

Katie Taylor (198th) was the club's sole representative for the U15 girls, and although she seemed disappointed with her efforts she actually had a good run. For someone who will be specialising in long jump and 300m this summer that's some pretty impressive endurance work!

Last up for the juniors was Howard Allison (250th) in the U13 boys' mud and mayhem! Howard's first run at this level was a steady one from which he will have learned a lot, and the difference in training since this event has already been a significant one.

The club had just two senior women competing in the 8K race, but both justified the journey down by finishing well up amongst the high-quality entry of 546. Emma Bexson (38:35, 216th) looks a lot more confident these days and consequently not only set off at a reasonable pace, but also managed to maintain it all the way through. The hilly, muddy course meant that Lynn Sherren (43:46, 378th) could display her talents to the full, despite limited training these days, with Hatti Dean (Hallamshire Harriers) taking the crown in 29:34 minutes.

By the time that nearly 1,500 senior men roared off up that first hill the deep mud was unrelenting, and at times it was difficult for the 9 Stratford runners to keep any momentum going! This 12K, 2-lap challenge saw Malcolm Bowyer's (53:22, 748th) expertise at chasing males around Hampstead Heath pay off with probably his best showing of the whole winter, followed back by an equivalently poor showing from Keith Hawkes (54:41, 833rd). Andy Cockerill (56:05, 916th) made a fairly late decision to attend, and a strong run will have convinced him that the decision was a good one, Paul Hawkins (59:37, 1,124th) showed how he revels in the trickier conditions as he produced an absolute flyer and Phil Howell (60:20, 1,162nd) battled on well despite the soft going not favouring his more muscular frame. James Deacon (60:51, 1,190th), who enjoyed his first nationals even if he found it hard work, was the final counter for the team, and this put the club into 101st place behind winners Newham & Essex Beagles.

Tony Jackson's (64:10, 1,306th) size will again not have helped him through the mud, Phil Marshall (64:32, 1,315th) just failed to gain the notable scalp of his club colleague and Phil Brennan (67:50, 1,377th) never fails to amaze that someone who takes up XC running again at the age of 65 should do so well. Annoyingly for everyone else who blamed the conditions for their poor times, Frank Tickner (Wells City) took the national title by plodding around in 38:02 minutes!

Parliament Hill would just have been a stroll round for Stratford AC's Pete Hill, who in recent years has become a leading authority on some of the toughest and most spectacular off-road races around. He recently travelled down to Devon to take part again in the legendary 'Grizzly' race, which is described as 'Twenty-ish muddy, hilly, boggy, beachy miles of the multiest-terrain running experience you will find this side of the end of time'! It is not meant to be the toughest race in the UK by any means, although it is very hard, but aims to provide a great deal of variety and a certain quirkiness. The slightly different (and longer) course

was not so muddy this year, although amongst all the usual difficulties the 1,500 runners were sent through a bog that you were lucky to come out of with your legs intact let alone your shoes!

On a fine morning with only a few squally showers the Shipston Sherpa finished well up the field in 391st place, despite not so much preparation this year, in a time of 3 hours 31:13 minutes. Kim Johnston (4:34:21) had also ventured down there, still unable to resist the most difficult of challenges, and he showed that he's keeping himself in decent shape with a position of 1,156th. The other Stratford AC runner was Lesley Kirk, another off-road phenomenon, but due to a long-standing foot problem she swapped to the 9-mile 'Grizzly cub' race. Despite her foot and no training, and stopping to take photographs along the way, Lesley surprised herself by coming in 62nd out of the 277 finishers, recording 1:35:28 and crossing the line not much more than a minute after the winner of her F45 age category! The main race winners were John MacFarlane (Thames Hare & Hounds) and Nicola Juniper (Thrift Green Trotters) in 2:19:08 and 2:33:53, with the victors in the cub race going to Martin Owen (unattached) and Emma Hitchins (South-West RR) in 58:58 and 60:32 respectively.