

The start of the cross-country season is generally a joyous occasion, as runners from far and wide give their spikes a glimpse of daylight for the first time since March and rather regret not having cleaned them after that final fixture! The season's opener for the seniors has, for the last dozen years or so, been at the impressive venue of Senneleys Park in Weoley Castle (south-west Birmingham), and is the one meeting that incorporates all the male and female league divisions as well as the open 'Cross Challenge'. The Birmingham XC League (males) and Midlands Women's XC League are well respected as two of the strongest in the UK, and the basic way that this all works is that the finishing positions of the first 4 women (6 for the males) from each club are added up, with the lowest total coming first and so on all the way down.

From a Stratford AC point of view the season got off to a fairly mediocre start, and with the club being in such a flourishing state membership-wise it was very disappointing to see the team managers having to frantically beg, borrow and steal just to get the bare minimum of 4 women and 12 men out running. The only saving grace on the day was that all those turning out for the club ran themselves into the ground to ensure that the season didn't end almost as soon as it had started, with the female quartet finishing in 17th place out of the 29 clubs from the region, and being placed in a magnificent 6th position in the veterans' rankings. The women's race was a 6K affair consisting of one 'short' lap and then one full lap, which included the infamous stream crossing – look it up on YouTube! The course had not been subject to the large rainfall of the last couple of weeks by this stage, so the undulating course was firm underfoot giving rise to relatively quick times, and although this stream crossing looked totally innocuous beforehand, as it always does, once a thousand runners with spikes have been through a few times it becomes a completely different ball-game!

The ever-reliable Sarah Bland (28:15,52nd) led the Stratford team back, pacing her race beautifully from start to finish to come in just ahead of another member who always gives a lot back to the club, Emma Bexson (29:11,74th). Emma has not had a great year from an injuries and health point of view, but does have determination second-to-none, and it was this asset that pulled her round in such a good position. Much the same could be said of Debbie Cooper (31:24,110th), who has suffered achilles nightmares for the past year or two but whose natural strength, fitness and competitive nature put her up into a place that totally belied her lack of training. This just left an excellent showing from Yvonne Caswell (31:43,119th) to save the day, and since the Shipston starlet was making her first competitive appearance in a number of years she made sure she started off steadily before surprising everyone by moving steadily through the field of 195 finishers. So this somewhat scratch team managed to pull off a great escape by totalling 236 points and leaving themselves in a comfortable mid-table position overall, and definitely still in with a chance of honours in the vets competition (with 281 points), whilst the universities of Birmingham and Loughborough took the top two spots ahead of Birchfield and Tipton.

For the Stratford males to come out of this first of four fixtures in 14th place amongst the 18-club Division 2 may not sound anything special, but this was a whole lot better than could have been expected 24 hours previously. The senior males had a 10K-jaunt to undertake, which involved one short and two water-jump filled long laps, and once the gun goes it was the traditional mad charge up the first hill involving all of the 700 participants! Unusually though, sheer volume of numbers meant a couple of frustrating bottleneck hold-ups for the masses on the first lap, before things started to stretch out.

Rob Minton (36:39,32nd) again carried the team flag home first, with his increased training really paying dividends in one of his strongest XC outings for a while, but on a day on limited positives

for the club it was the showing of late entrant Danny Tolhurst (39:04,75th) that really shone through. It wasn't just the fact that Danny made such a massive difference on both his club and XC debut that impressed people so much, but more the quietly controlled manner in which he went about it amongst such a high-quality field. Having only purchased his first ever pair of spikes that morning he sensibly didn't go with the fierce early pace, and was rewarded with a lightning quick second-half in which he was constantly moving up through the rankings. Third A counter back for the club was Wayne Vickers (39:46,86th), who conversely did set off slightly too quickly and paid the price later on, and he was followed in by the old boy pairing of Malcolm Bowyer (41:05,108th) and Keith Hawkes (41:21,110th). This dynamic duo are usually not too far apart, although unfortunately on this occasion neither were on particularly good form but did just about hang on in there. This just left Andy Cockerill (41:58,120th), a tremendously reliable servant for the club in recent years whose terrific run here was a great follow-on from his summer form, to complete the A team and give them a total of 531 points. Whilst the latter 3 counters were delighted to make the A team, they know that in reality if the squad are to rise up the division then they should only really be there as back-up for the top 6, rather than an integral part of it.

Two tremendous runs opened up the B team's account, as Tony Jackson (44:14,140th) and Paul Hawkins (44:35,146th) found the going to their liking and can be well satisfied with their efforts. Due to the lack of volunteers from within the club, team manager Paul had to run despite carrying an injury just to ensure a complete B team, and whilst he ran surprisingly well, and luckily did not aggravate this injury, it is still highly disappointing for him to be put into this difficult position. James Deacon (45:04,152nd) had been on fine form of late, and the course looked like it would suit his good leg strength, but it just didn't quite happen for him on the day. Phil Marshall (48:07,185th) is another whose efforts for the club in recent times just can't be over-estimated, and he was fourth B counter back, followed in by vital contributions from a rapidly-finishing Luke Watkins (49:31,194th) and Andy Turner (52:30,203rd). This latter pair duly emphasised how every point really does count in these meetings, and by ensuring that the squad achieved a B team score (1,040) it meant that the club not only finished an excellent 7th B team on the day, but it also keeps things going for the remainder of the winter season. It was a real shame that Dave Wolstencroft, another always keen to help out, will have been highly frustrated by the joys of weekend working on Longbridge Island that foiled his plans to make the start line, and he could only watch on as the race developed.

The strength of these Division 2 races were highlighted by a fascinating battle at the front, with fellow GB XC internationals Tom Humphries (Cannock & Stafford) and Chris Davies (Telford) vying for top spot. The former edged it by 7 seconds (30:45), but the latter will be consoled by the fact his club were clear winners ahead of Gloucester in second. At the bottom it looks like Coventry's Sphinx are doomed already, probably along with Dudley Kingswinford, but the third relegation spot is something that the Stratford men are going to have to keep a very close eye on.