

It's not often that you get the chance to test your endurance running skills against the might of a narrow-gauge steam train, but 'Race the Train' down in Wales is one of the most well-known, popular and distinctive events in the British running calendar. The train does give you a chance by stopping at all the stations from its starting point at Tywyn on the coast to its turn around point at Abergynolwyn in the depth of the Welsh mountains, but even so the certificate received if you do sneak ahead of it has to be hard earned!

A quartet of Stratford AC runners headed down to mid-Wales for this annual multi-terrain jamboree, with three taking part in the main 14+ mile bun-fight and one taking on the not much easier 10K alternative. The distance for the principal race is always variable, dependant upon the permission of various farmers, but basically the first 7 miles is a relatively easy blast along the valley floor, and if you have any intention of getting one over on the train then you need to be well ahead at this halfway point, because the route then takes the competitors up into the mountains where the fun begins!

Recent recruit to the club Natasha Gordon, who over the second half of the summer assisted so much to the club's track & field campaign, took herself even further outside her comfort zone by bravely taking on the 10K Quarry Challenge in the morning. All of the 337 runners were bussed out to the start and then raced back,

with the tough course made all the harder by a very strong headwind and the clearing morning rain. Despite the fact that Natasha didn't quite beat the train, a more than respectable time of 67:13 is something that she can be proud of on her off-road debut.

Despite the fact that Rob Minton and Sarah Bland have many multi-terrain campaigns behind them, they were novices for this particular treat, but it was difficult to believe as they both produced quality runs. The morning drizzle had stopped in time for the off, but previous wet periods had left the trails reasonably muddy and tricky underfoot, meaning footwear choice was a key one – difficult for this duo who didn't know the course. Sarah started steadily as she was unsure as to the state of her speed endurance, but then she got stuck behind slower runners on the initially narrow paths up in the hills as well as jolting her knee quite sharply down a hole. The girl Bland kept going as strong as ever though and crossed the line in a marvellous time of 2 hours 1:13 for 348th place (28th woman). Rob was in his element on this type of terrain, and duly dealt comfortably with everything thrown into his path as he finished in a fantastic time of 1 hour 36:49, which put him into 32nd position out of the 959 runners to complete the course.

In contrast, experienced 'Race the Train' campaigner Malcolm Bowyer, who treated his family to the delightful experience of a camping weekend in a rather damp Wales, didn't waste all that extra effort by finishing too far ahead of the train. Despite getting stuck in a queue at the waterfall steps Malcolm paced it beautifully to finish 77 seconds under the 1 hour 48 train cut-off. There were another 149 competitors who joined our two Stratford boys in beating that cut-off (of which only 6 were women), Gareth Raven (Sale Harriers) was a very impressive winner in 1:21:18 and Kirsty Gallagher (Wootton RR) was the leading lady in 1:42:02. If you get a chance to run it, watch it or be a passenger on the train then take it with both hands (or feet)!

The annual Stratford AC v Kenilworth Runners v Spa Striders inter-club race took place on a pleasant Wednesday evening prior to 'Race the Train', with this year being the Leamington club's turn to organise. They chose a beautifully scenic 6-mile circular route, starting and finishing from the Old New Inn in Harbury, and taking in the village of Chesterton as well as a stroll past the famous windmill. Like many picturesque courses though it was a tough one, with a continual series of rolling undulations following a fast downhill start.

Although the rivalry is an extremely friendly one the event is always keenly contested, and although Stratford had some outstanding individual performances it was not to be their night on the team front! Kate Wright (38:38, 16th) again showed what a star she is as she was first woman back to the village, nearly a minute ahead of Striders' Carolyn Wilkinson (who was one of those 6 women to beat the Welsh train three days later), followed back by Sarah Bland (43:18, 51st) and the increasingly speedy pair of Debbie Crisp (51:15, 104th) and Anna Schofield (52:51, 110th).

There was a similar story amongst the men as top 10 finishes were earned by a trio who are all flying along at the moment – Rob Minton (34:53, 2nd), Steve Donnelly (35:35, 3rd) and Wayne Vickers (37:44, 8th). These three were given great back-up just behind by Andy Cockerill (38:32, 15th) and the two Dan's, Lynch (39:10, 20th) and Rumble (39:37, 23rd), as well as further down from the likes of Tony Jackson (42:26, 40th), Dave Maundrell (44:03, 55th) and a good battle between Andy Turner (47:58, 87th) and Graham Black (47:59, 88th). Kenilworth's Phil Gould was top dog in 33:46, and was consequently part of their victorious men's team, with Striders pipping Stratford in a close battle for second (1,421 to 1,454 place totals). It was much the same amongst the ladies, as Spa Striders were comfortably ahead and Kenilworth edged in front of Stratford (744 to 762) for the runners up spot. While no-one would want this annual light-hearted get together to become a more serious competition, Spa Striders did kindly purchase a large shield for each of the winning teams to keep for the next 12 months, as well as doing a terrific job on the organising front.