

Being part of a running club gives an insight into the new challenges and ever-increasing lengths that runners often go to in order to get their regular high, and from this point of view Stratford AC is certainly no different!

With a title almost as long as the race, the 'Down Tow Up Flow Thames Towpath Half-Marathon' may have a lot to live up to, but this marvellous race never fails to disappoint. The club's long-standing member Lesley Kirk combined a weekend visit to her parents with participation in this 13.1-miler and, despite being below par due to ongoing foot problems, Tiddington's golden girl did not return north empty-handed! A glorious morning greeted the 400 runners as they assembled at Marlow Rugby Club, ready to run the point-to-point route to Windsor following the Thames towpath. Organised by Purple Patch Running, this popular event sold out well in advance of race day, and as well as the scenic route - which draws runners from miles - another plus point is that the organisers lay on coaches in order to transport entrants to the start. Each year the route reverses, so next summer the start will be in Windsor and finish in Marlow.

The Marlow to Windsor route passes through the pretty riverside villages and the towns of Bourne End, Cookham and Maidenhead, before finally finishing at the Windsor Leisure Centre in sight of the castle. Apart from a short couple of stretches on road, two bridges and various kissing gates to negotiate, the route is relatively flat, although care was needed to avoid tree roots and some parts were quite narrow in places.

A finishing time of 1 hour 45:43 is not what Lesley would normally hope for, but given the lack of training, plus feeling unwell after the first 4 miles due to trying new sports drink, this was actually a sterling effort. Despite all of this she was still 1<sup>st</sup> female O50, 12<sup>th</sup> female and 70<sup>th</sup> overall out of the 374 who crossed the finish line. The race was won by Juan Garcia Lopes in 1:20:56 and the first female was Lesley Whiley (Reading RR) with 1:29:19.

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Given that Lesley foot operation was imminent she decided, like most normal people would, that rattling off an off-road marathon before she went under the knife would be an ideal opportunity for one last long run! SAC club Chris Seeney, veteran of hundreds of marathons both at home and abroad, likes to take things one step further than most by hosting his own event once a year. Although on a much smaller scale than most marathons, for friends who like him enjoy the challenge of the great outdoors, it is a quirky, fun event not to be missed!

The start and finish is from his house in Bishopton and, with the help of four pages of written directions, follows The Avon Valley and Arden Way footpaths / trails through Stratford, Welford, Marcliff, Bidford, Broom, skirting Oversley Woods before heading back via the villages of Haselor, Walcote, Aston Cantlow and Wilmcote. Out of the 25 invited entrants, five were from Stratford AC. Kate Wright, who arrived ready to start just after 7am, headed off with Chris King (Fairlands Valley Spartans) who, luckily for Kate, had run the route two years previously so had some idea of where they were going! They were followed 20 minutes later by the trio of Lesley Kirk, Steve Kirk and Pete Hill. Steve was using the distance in preparation for his upcoming Ironman triathlon in Barcelona, and Pete Hill was also taking advantage of the distance to prepare for his Snowdonia Marathon debut in October. Some while later, after a leisurely lie-in, Pete Law made his start with a group of 100 marathon Club members.

Chris had laid on five checkpoints along the route, each manned by friends who had run the route before. They were a welcome sight to all runners and the one walker taking part. Chris also selflessly, rather than take part himself, drove around the route, keeping a check on anyone who may have been struggling or had to drop out.

Out of the famous five, Kate was first back in a time of 4:35, followed by Lesley, Steve and Pete Hill in 4:40, then Pete Law in 5:33. The last person to finish was Pat Caden (Road Runners Club) in a time of 7:45, although he did intentionally walk the whole route after starting at 6:30am!

Many thanks should go to Chris Seeney for organising such an enjoyable event, and also for laying on a fantastic spread of food afterwards, as well as to the checkpoint marshals, one of whom was another SAC member, John Butler.

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It takes some doing to race well on three consecutive days, but when you're the wrong side of 65 with a fairly dodgy injury record it's something very special indeed. Stratford AC's John Turner travelled to South Wales on the Tuesday evening, took part in the Kenilworth and Spa Striders Harbury race the next night and finally did the Rowheath 5K over in Birmingham on the Thursday!

The fourth and final Rose Inn summer series race took place in its usual rural setting on the other side of the Severn, but this time outside forces intervened as a local farmer decided that 7:30 was a better time for milking that day rather than the usual 5:30! The evening started well for John and son Andy with cool but sunny conditions that were ideal for racing, but just after the first of the four scheduled miles the herd of cows appeared in the middle of the road! Despite the narrow lane the first 18 runners managed to get through alright, at which point the herd unsurprisingly became rather panicky with a group of people running at them and from then on it was a case of trying to spot a gap and edge past in ones or twos. Although this episode rather blew the chance of notching a decent time, our aged bovine whisperer still recorded a reasonable 27:02 minutes for 58<sup>th</sup> place, and first O65. The younger Turner also kept going well as he crossed the line in 31:32 to finish 112<sup>th</sup>, with Michael Johnson (Cardiff AC) and Debbie Marsden (Westbury Harriers) coming out on top in 19:56 and 24:02 respectively. The overall series rankings were based on your best 3 out of the 4, and whilst Andy finished well up the table John went one better to deservedly take the O65s trophy. The 'free' beer ticket and well stocked barbecue rounded off another enjoyable and eventful summer across the border.

The Rowheath 5K was also the finale of a summer series, this time the third of 3, and the pair of father and son combinations from Stratford AC that were present all felt the exertions of the previous night's tough inter-club race. In the case of Graham and Luke Watkins, a pre-match meal of large pizza followed by half a gallon of ice cream probably didn't help a great deal either!

On another fine and cool night for racing Turner Snr was first of the quartet to finish both of the undulating laps, in a time of 21:09 and 58<sup>th</sup> position, followed back by Luke Watkins (23:49, 118<sup>th</sup>) who looked more than a little queasy on the final sprint to the line. Andy Turner (24:00, 119<sup>th</sup>) showed how much stronger he is these days as a terrific run just couldn't quite catch Luke, with Graham Watkins (24:25, 125<sup>th</sup>) a further few seconds adrift in an entertaining three-way struggle. There were 165 finishers, with the race won by John Ndayisenga (Birchfield) in 15:19 and first lady was Lindsay Doyle (B'ham Uni) in 18:42.