

Autumn brings with it the end of the triathlon season, and in the space of a week Stratford AC members had been competing in four events that highlighted the spectrum of this ever-growing and ever-demanding sport.

Over in Spain two more names got added to the short list of club members who have completed the ultimate challenge that this sport has to offer – the ironman. The Challenge series is a rapidly growing alternative to the Ironman brand for long-distance triathlon, and Challenge Barcelona was the first time this event had been staged. It was actually based quite a way north in the tourist town of Calella, which had many advantages such as making it simpler for the organisers to close a large stretch of busy coast road to traffic. The organisation itself was tremendous, including paying £10,000 an hour to keep the parallel toll road free, and the cosmopolitan field of 1,800 were left with very few excuses to perform poorly!

The two Stratford competitors, Steve Kirk and Keith Hawkes, stood rather nervously on the beach at daybreak, waiting patiently for nearly 2 hours for their respective waves to enter the water. The 2.4-mile swim did not much resemble a UK sea swim, as the calm, clear waters of the Mediterranean ensured the high-class field could maintain an easy rhythmical stroke. Both Steve and Keith opted for a full change of kit between disciplines, rather than racing all day in a tri-suit, and therefore felt suitably comfortable as they set off on the three-lap fast 112-mile bike leg. Cycling for that length of time in unseasonably warm conditions did cause a number of drop-outs through heatstroke, but our dynamic duo were careful to sacrifice a little speed in order to stay in control. On the 4-lap 26.2-mile marathon run Steve's stronger biking meant that he started running earlier, and therefore had longer in the warm sun, with Keith's second-half of the run including long stretches of total darkness!

The bottom line of all this was that Steve arrived to a rapturous welcome in the floodlit grandstand finish to complete his first ironman in a magnificent time of 11 hours 43 minutes, with Keith just over an hour behind him in 12:54. Steve's splits reflected both the discipline and hard training that became his trademark over the summer, swimming a very impressive 1:09, cycling 5:58 and running all of his 4:15 marathon, apart from when he got an attack of cramps in the latter stages. Keith had a specific game plan and was also very disciplined in sticking to it, starting off with a slightly wayward swim (1:11), before grinding out the bike (6:45) and chatting for most of his 4:32 run, although serious questions need to be asked about anyone who spends 24 minutes in transition! This placed our boys 714th and 1,081st overall, and 88th and 149th respectively in their M45-49 age category. A special mention has to go to Steve's wife Lesley, whose unwavering support throughout the day proved absolutely invaluable.

'One Last Tri' is an aptly named end of season half-ironman down in the New Forest, and it witnessed a couple of SAC members making triathlon look far too easy! Rob Minton, an inexperienced triathlete making his middle-distance debut, and Sarah Bland had done no swimming or biking all summer, but their natural sporting aptitude and all-round fitness saw them throw the training manual out of the window with some spectacular results.

The 1300m swim and T1 probably weren't the pair's strongest suit, but a beautiful 90K bike course saw them steadily gain places, and for once the running club's triathletes actually produced flying

performances on the seriously hilly 12-mile run! The lack of training should really have hit them as they went from bike to run, but Rob pulled off the 4th fastest run of the day – an awesome 1:16:15 including T2 - with Sarah also having a great run to finish as the 8th fastest female runner in 1:34:03. Combined with his swim (30:20) and bike (2 hours 56), this placed Rob as 25th male overall – vastly impressive, and we now look forward to his duathlon results in the spring while he gets some swim training in! Sarah's other splits were a 30:17 swim and a 3 hour 21 cycle, which put her up to the giddy heights of 12th female and 2nd in her F45 age group.

Stratford's very own twice yearly event - the 'Warwickshire Triathlon' – may not be everyone's favourite event, but it certainly attracts good numbers. Six SAC'ers undertook October's sprint challenge, with a 400m swim at the Leisure Centre, a 23K bike ride out to Sherbourne and finally the 5K run alongside the river. The traffic restrictions on the A46 near to Longbridge island did not do much to improve an already slightly dodgy cycle route, and unforeseen road works on the main A429 road from Wellesbourne just about completed the set.

All the women's times were bound to be a little affected by the fact that the traffic was that much worse by the time their starts came round, but the trio of Stratford females competing were led home by the remarkable Debbie Cooper (73:14 – 7:06/43:12/22:56). For Debbie to come 3rd when injury has so limited her running just shows what a special talent she really is. Two of the club's less experienced triathletes completed the set, with Sarah Odell (86:53 – 8:13/54:38/24:02) and Marianne Flint (92:20 – 8:05/57:14/27:01) doing brilliantly to be placed 51st and 90th respectively amongst the 195 finishers. It would be interesting to see whether the next distance up (Olympic distance) would suit Sarah even more, given her great strength and stamina.

The first Stratford male back was that human dynamo himself, Dan Lynch (71:11 - 7:41/39:52/23:38) in 40th place, although it was a slightly frustrating experience as he got to the temporary traffic-lights prior to a marshal being posted there to give time allowances, and his race splits aren't correct either! Graham Black (71:44 – 7:01/42:18/22:25) has really worked hard this year to regain a lot of all-round fitness, and his reward was a highly satisfying 47th place, all of which just left novice triathlete James Deacon (79:47 - 8:30/48:51/22:26) to wrap things up. James was 176th out of the 513 males who completed the course, and he certainly has the natural body strength and stamina to get even quicker than this valiant effort – watch this space!

The South Shropshire Sprint Tri, based in and around Ludlow Leisure Centre, saw Stratford AC's Phil Howell produce another convincing performance, and the undoubted potential that he possesses will continue to be realised as he gets more and more experience under his race belt. Slightly longer than a standard sprint tri – 400m / 26K / 6.25K – Phil struggled a little towards the end of the swim (9:55), mainly due to a chesty cold, but he powered round on the bike (52:53) before jumping off and zipping through the field with a 26:46 minute run split. His total time of 1 hour 29:34 pushed him up to an impressive 73rd out of the total finishers of 283, and given his renown dedication to training Phil is other who should come out of the winter months with high expectations.