

The cross-country fixtures have been coming thick and fast for the off-road runners of Stratford AC, and the wintry weather has been providing a great variation of testing conditions! The senior squads both had their penultimate league fixtures taking place in Coventry, with the women at Coundon Hall Park and the men at Wyken Croft, and both consolidated their very encouraging first-halves of the season.

The ladies ventured over to Coundon for their Midland Womens' League fixture with an excellent turnout of 8, and this fine group finished up in a marvellous 12th place out of the 23 clubs who managed to complete a full scoring team. The burden of captaincy is an oft-discussed topic in sport, but Sarah Bland (25:00, 31st) combines all her team duties without even a pause for breath and produced another terrific run to also romp home as 6th veteran amongst some top-class runners. Emma Bexson (25:39, 51st) is another who just doesn't ever seem to slow down, and her London Marathon training will be greatly boosted by such consistently strong off-road running, which left the ever-dependable Alison Bagnall (26:23, 65th) to complete the 147-point scoring total for the club's senior ladies. With young Emma being replaced by Lesley Kirk (27:56, 83rd) in the masters' counting, this again showed the strength within the club of the veteran women as they totalled 179 points for another impressive team placing of 6th.

The flat 6K-course, which mainly skirts around football pitches, is not incredibly interesting but did have some splendid muddy bits to keep everyone happy, and Vanessa Crookes (28:11, 85th) looked more than comfortable on this surface as she provided an invaluable back-up should any of the counters have got injured. Kate Whitaker (33:46, 127th) showed what a determined woman she is with a memorable XC debut that reflected her vast fitness gains recently, Annabel Richardson (35:43, 130th) continues to look fitter and faster with each passing injury-free week whilst Victoria Jeffs (43:51, 135th) showed her unlimited enthusiasm yet again as she refused to be intimidated by being engulfed in the start of the men's Division 1 race!

The men's Birmingham XC League Division 2 course was a more varied 9.6K, 3-lap affair around the nature reserve at Wyken Croft, which had plenty of twists and turns in addition to the obligatory long stretches of mud and a horrible uphill start and finish! From the club's point of view this was always going to be a damage limitation exercise as far as league position goes, and this was exactly what was achieved as they came out 14th amongst the 18-club division, and in doing so comfortably held onto 10th spot overall.

Rob Minton (35:43, 50th) again showed what a great club-man he is to have around as he turned up for his first run after a long spell under the weather, and he was chased all the way home by a splendid showing from a strong-looking Johann Breytenbach (35:57, 53rd). Patrick Taylor (37:28, 77th) produced a well-paced race and another trademark flying last half-mile, Keith Hawkes (37:40, 82nd) was fourth back and Malcolm Bowyer (38:16, 98th) is another whose form is beautifully picking up as the spring marathons start to loom. Andy Cockerill (39:49, 130th) got just reward for his tremendous winter as he made a first ever appearance as an A team counter, and this left the team with 490 points and mid-table security well within reach in the last fixture.

For the B team Phil Howell (41:04, 155th) produced probably his best XC trip of the season, putting another highly impressive showing from James Deacon (42:09, 168th) slightly into the shade, with the pair increasing their position from the previous race by a fantastic 42 and 27 places respectively. Pete Evans (42:23, 171st) was really starting to look like his old self fitness-wise before a very unfortunate ankle problem forced him into a sort of walk/jog/run strategy for the latter stages, but he did manage to get back past the final trio of B team counters who were battling away with other - John Turner (42:29, 173rd), Tony Jackson (42:37, 175th) and Pete Walton (42:41, 176th)! The ripple effect of the higher A team score meant that the B team totalled 1,018 points, their highest of the season also, but this still put them into a very respectable 8th on the day and a much creditable 6th overall. All six of them also pushed at least one counter from other club's A teams to a lower placing, therefore directly assisting Stratford's A team's position.

The season-long closeness of this mid-pack of Stratford runners continued as Steve Kirk (42:56, 177th) and Paul Hawkins (43:09, 178th) followed immediately after the final B team counter, both looking as strong as they have done on the country in a good while. The course was probably a bit too short and sharp for the stamina men that are Ian Thornett (43:50, 186th) and Pete Hill (43:51, 187th), but it did give them an opportunity to push each other along (with Southam narrowly getting the better of Shipston), while Phil Marshall (44:59, 192nd) again showed that he is one of the hardest working runners in the club. Luke Watkins (46:49, 201st) benefited from fine family support as he raced his way round, Andy List (47:44, 211th) did well to improve his position from race 2 and Andy Turner (50:57, 216th) has hopefully now started to see the back of his foot injury that meant he again slightly struggled here.

Kidderminster & Stourport had an awful day as they plummeted down the table, Newcastle (Staffs) AC had a storming performance (that won't save them from certain relegation though), while Bournville drop down to 3rd as they were replaced as leaders by the City of Stoke. With just one more league meeting to go for the seniors, followed by the nationals in London, spring is just around the corner, although it may not quite seem like it at the moment!