

Last week's New York Marathon usually marks the end of the autumn marathon season, and a number of Stratford AC runners have been involved in these long-distance challenges over the last few weeks, putting their bodies through pressures that nature probably never designed them for! After impressive performances at Abingdon from some of the club's more experienced distance runners, the New York event witnessed a sparkling debut from Kate Sergent at this tortuous 26.2-mile ordeal.

Kate has come such a long way running-wise in the last two years but the pressure of your first marathon, combined with raising lots of cash for Children With Leukemia, took things to a whole new level. Any doubts that were present though just disappeared on the day as the golden girl coped admirably with the nerves, the long wait at the Staten Island start, climbing the 5 bridges, knees and hips that were screaming from the 20-mile mark and the last 3 miles in hilly Central Park to record an outstanding time of 4 hours 54:24. With her watch stopping half-way round Kate could only hope that she'd done enough as she crossed that line to get under the magical 5-hour barrier, but 10K splits of 61, 69, 73 and 75 minutes (2:18 half) were testament to the disciplined stamina training that she'd put in over the previous months, and with her son completing the same course in a lightning quick 3:45 it was a very happy trip to the Big Apple for the Sergent clan! A finishing position of 214th out of the 512 in her 55-59 age category only went to re-emphasise just what a quality performance this was on what is not a fast course.

Technology can be a great thing, and the thought of her many friends back in the UK tracking every completed mile on-line kept her going during those tough miles when all you want to do is stop – and by 23 miles Kate knew that nothing was going to take this magnificent achievement away from her. The amazing crowds in all 5 boroughs, good running weather and immaculate race organisation from the people of this great city all played their part in this success story, but great mental strength from the girl herself and the support of a remarkably close-knit training group that she runs with were probably much more key when it came to the crunch.

Shipston's stamina king, Pete Hill, chose a somewhat more rural location to test out his endurance, and by selecting the Snowdon Marathon he undertook one of the toughest marathons that the UK has to offer. The race itself takes place on the roads surrounding Wales' highest mountain, rather than up to the peak itself, but there are very few places to get into a rhythm as the steep hills continue almost from start to finish! When the weather is wet and windy, as it most definitely was this year, then the challenge is even greater, and this wasn't particularly helped when a 20-minute delay to the start meant everyone was soaking wet and cold from the beginning.

With 2,000 entrants (just over 1,300 finishers) it is also one of the most popular British marathons and Pete did terrifically well to cross the line in 406th place. He struggled all the way from the halfway point though, possibly because of not getting his nutrition strategy quite right and also the return of the high winds and driving rain towards the end of his race, so this really was a momentous effort just to get to the finish. Getting back in under the 4-hour mark was even more impressive, with an official time of 3 hours 59:07 against his name (11th out of 54 in his M55-59 age group), and he will have learned a lot from the experience. The winning male and female times of 2:46:56 and 3:17:00 underlined the tough nature of the course and the conditions, whilst another of Stratford's other non-stop enduros – Kim

Johnston – completed it in 5:05:16 (953rd male). The one minor downside of the event is the slightly hit-and-miss organisation, which is a shame given such a spectacular setting and for somewhere that always features at the sharp end of surveys to find runners' favourite UK races.

As a possible sign of things to come two of the Stratford AC juniors took part in the build-up races at Snowdon, with Matthew Tiller and sister Laura showing a great deal of promise. Matt came 9th in the U14's 3.4K race (despite being up to 2 years younger than many in the field), which set off from the senior start at Nant Peris, and Laura came 4th in the U12's 1.9K challenge, which went from the main HQ at Llanberis Community Centre. The weather was terrible at this point, with driving rain for the U14 event, which marginally calmed down in time for the U12's, but despite their uncomfortably wet runs they both seemed to thoroughly enjoy the day - hardy marathon runners in waiting perhaps!

The Cotswold Challenge appears very much at the opposite end of the numbers spectrum to NY and Snowdon, but Stratford AC's Pete Hill also appeared in this beautifully low-key event. It started off in 1988 as just a long walking event (it is still organised by the Long Distance Walking Association), and this year there were 121 of these slightly more sedate rambles who were given an hour's grace before the runners set off. The walkers did the traditional 25-mile route, with the runners opening up with a 1.5-mile lap of Birdlip (where the event starts and finishes), just so that it could be called a marathon!

After an extremely hilly start at Birdlip, the route meanders around Bisley, Painswick, Brimsfield, Haresfield, Coopers Hill (yes, the cheese-rolling hill!) and Witcombe Reservoirs, before returning back to the welcoming sight of Birdlip village hall. There are some stunning views, especially of the 7 bridges stretching into Wales, although the 4,333 feet of ascent might take a little of the edge off these views by the end! Most participants run in pairs or groups for navigation purposes, with entrants just given printed directions to the 5 checkpoints, so the emphasis is most definitely on enjoyment of the picturesque surroundings.

Having said that, times and positions are recorded, and after the leaders had arrived back around the 5 hour 9 minute mark Pete (17th) followed them in 39 minutes later at 5:48. Shipston's racing snake was joined by a fellow SAC member and veteran of this (and many other) long-distance challenges, Pete Law, with the indefatigable grandfather easing home in 6 hours 34 to be placed 32nd.