

First Annual Montana Open

University of Montana Golf Course, Missoula – At noon today, a frosty morning under the shadow of Mount Sentinel was giving way to a warm and sunny afternoon as women’s teams from five Montana towns prepared to start the first ever Montana Open cross-country race. Each team stepped into their assigned starting boxes on the half-moon-shaped starting line that was spray-painted on the patchy soil and unkempt grass that covered the otherwise unused south campus field northeast of Dornblaser Stadium.

The idea for the ‘Open’ sprang from the mind of the University of Montana’s cross-country coach, Dick Koontz, earlier this fall. Koontz suggested the idea to me (his assistant coach) as an inexpensive way to get another competition for the Grizzly cross-country teams. Koontz wanted me to invite an all-star team from each Montana city, but his idea fell through when it was discovered that the meet would not count as an official competition without the inclusion of another university team. Koontz dropped the idea at that point, but I was so fascinated with the concept that I decided to pick it back up. I believe others will also be excited about this competition. My dream is for this meet to become an *event* that will stand alone, drawing together and uniting runners from all around Montana.

The woman’s race was anything but a united affair. Soon after the starting gun, it was clear that Billings’ Karen Sanford-Gall would dominate as she steadily pulled away from Kalispell’s Vonda Garcia and the rest of the field. Sanford-Gall won decisively by a 91-second margin on the 5K course, and she also pulled her team to victory. Sanford-Gall works in Billings as the Assistant Director of the Big Sky State Games.

In the week leading up to the meet, I polled each team organizer by telephone, and the majority thought it was a good idea to reduce the number of scoring runners needed for a team from five to three in an attempt to generate more complete city teams. The scoring change aided the four-woman Billings team to take home the large cup-shaped “traveling” trophy that they will keep for one year. They will engrave their town’s name into the cup, before returning it for the next champions to claim.

There was a twin cup awarded to the top men’s team. The two cups’ combined price of \$80 was nearly erased by the one-dollar entry fee that was charged to participants.

Each city team was assigned a uniform color for the race, and the home standing Missoula men’s team was wearing the white as they had little trouble collecting the championship cup with only eight team points.

Randy Ashley recently moved to Missoula from Atlanta. Ashley was a teammate of legendary Montana running star Shannon Butler at Auburn University, and it was Butler that drew Ashley to Montana to train for the US Olympic Trials Marathon. The “S” in Ashley’s name may stand for “Super.” Around Missoula, Ashley has been compared to Clark Kent with his ill-fitted, thick, black-rimmed, plastic glasses, loosely worn casual dress attire, and clunky, black leather shoes. Ashley showed his super side today, by running to a 13 second victory over Helena’s Steve Simpson. Simpson was the only runner able to break into Missoula’s top four finishers.

- Ray Hunt, Meet Director