

Hartpence Horses Missoula to Seventh Victory

Montana Tech, Butte – Again this year, praise and thanks must be heaped on Butte's Highland Ridge Runners for their efforts in hosting the Montana Cup. Mother Nature did her part too by making unbelievably fine weather for the third consecutive year in Butte's mile-high, and climatically challenged setting. *Last* year's 7.5K course was well liked for its rugged layout, and so was used again this year, making it the first ever repeat Cup course.

Nicole Hunt and I (the author) accomplished another first today. We became the first married couple to claim both women's and men's individual victories. I have always considered myself exceptionally lucky, and yet, I never imagined that I would know a woman as fast as Nicole, let alone marry one.

Nicole is a self described “jogger turned runner” who started training seriously in the winter of 1992, after she and her family returned from Chicago to her girl-hood roots in Missoula. In her previous years in the Midwest, Nicole had become convinced that she could one day break the 20-minute barrier for 5K. Nicole ‘walked on’ to the University of Montana's 1992 track team, and there she did lower her 5,000 meter PR down past 20 all the way to 18:01. I met Nicole while I was the assistant men's cross-country coach for the Grizzlies. Nicole colored herself as a jogger in my eyes when she asked my advice about her new racing spikes: “I've never seen this kind of shoe before. How do I get the pointy metal things screwed into the shoes?”

Nicole transferred to Montana State University a year later, and there became even more devoted to training. New PR's have resulted in each successive season. Nicole's PR's this year, included a course record smashing 17:19, in Helena's Governor's Cup 5K. That record was previously held by Montana Cup heroin, Karen Sanford-Gall.

Today, Bozeman's fourteen-year-old Nordic skiing sensation, Kristina Trygstad, led the first stage of the race before relinquishing the lead to Nicole. Nicole's high fitness level allowed her to dictate the pace thereafter, and she pulled away to a 38 second victory. The Missoula duo of Loreen McRae and Mary Thane finished second and third, respectively. McRae and Thane didn't have to wait long to see the rest of their victorious squad arrive at the finish; all five Missoula racers placed in the top eleven spots [Becky Broeder (6), Susanna Gaunt (7), and Stacy Tangren (11)]. The victory earned the Missoula women their second straight Cup and pizza feast at Butte's Silverbow Pizza.

Joining the women for pizza were the Missoula men who extended their unbeaten Cup streak to seven years. Despite the previous wins, Missoula's latest victory came as a surprise to many, given that most of the core runners from previous years had moved away. Long-standing team organizer, John Hartpence's pride and determination helped extend Missoula's streak. He almost seemed to will his new team past the competition, which included speedy challengers from Kalispell's nationally ranked, and florescent-orange-clad high schoolers, and from strong teams from Bozeman and Helena.

Hartpence was a disciple of world-famous running coach Jack Daniels at Cortland State University of New York, and he followed the same path as Daniels had, by attending graduate school in the University of Montana's exercise physiology program. Hartpence arrived in Missoula in 1991 with an infectious attitude that quickly enlivened Missoula running and triathloning circles. Hartpence was and is at the heart of a triathlon group that is known widely as *Team Stampede*, and he also started Missoula's Tuesday night community track workouts, where many runners have found camaraderie and inspiration.

The first thing one notices about Hartpence is his size. He stands like Gulliver among Lilliputian distance runners. Hartpence's highest individual Cup placing has been fourth in 1993 and again in 1996. In other races that have a “Clydesdale” division, Hartpence has stomped the competition with an iron hoof. Hartpence weighs 14 stone and he stands 18 hands tall, and he has an appetite for competition like a draft horse has for hay. During his college years, Hartpence competed in *every* event in the intramural track meets. And he organized an open racing circuit that included a “dirty dozen donut three-mile”, a “pizza two-mile”, a “beer mile”, and a “moonlight naked quarter mile.” Use your imagination here.

Imagine also Helena's fantastic high school runner, Rowdy Sargeson, covered with scrapes and gashes. Sargeson already had broken front teeth from an accident last night. During the first kilometer of today's race, Sargeson caught a spike on a rock while descending a steep hill, and then he planted himself in the road's packed gravel. Needless to say, Sargeson's wounds required medical attention, but not until after he resumed racing to finish tenth. Sargeson left his racing shoes at the finish line, stating that the shoes were “cursed.” The cursed shoes were collected and donated to a thrift store, so if you're shopping for used, size-10 racing shoes, beware.

Helena and Kalispell each had three runners place in the top ten, and Bozeman also had two. Missoula had only one [defending champ, Steve Bonifer (4)], and it appeared that their winning streak was ended, but that was before Hartpence galloped through the finish, herding the remainder of his team with him [Gabe Gilmore (11), Steve Simpson (12), John Hartpence (13), Jeff Stratton (14)]. Even with their complete squad finished, Missoula was still vulnerable. Kalispell came closest to pulling off the victory, but their chance was gone by the time their fifth runner finished in 24th. The top four teams were separated by only eleven points, with Missoula winning 54 to 59 over second place Kalispell. Bozeman (61) and Helena (65) were also close.

Hartpence reported that he is seeking collegiate coaching positions outside Montana, so the Cup may have to find a new home other than his living room. If that comes to be, John Hartpence will be missed in Missoula and at the Montana Cup.

- Ray Hunt, Montana Cup Results Coordinator