

Controversy Reigns in Montana Cup

Head Lane, Helena - A calm and sunny afternoon greeted runners in Helena's Scratch Gravel Hills for the 9th annual Montana Cup. Both women and men competed on a 7.64K course. The outline of the course resembled a tennis racket by starting and finishing on a long straight dirt road across the valley flats and with a loop through the forested Scratch Gravels in the middle. Each runner in this year's meet wore an official jersey in the color of her or his city, and the jerseys greatly aided the eye in identifying teams. The inclusion of jerseys also raised the race's entry fee from the usual \$5 up to \$15, which amounted to charity on the part of the hosts, because each jerseys cost them \$14.50, wholesale.

The women's race had 26 runners who started with an air-horn blast at fifteen minutes after noon. One of those 26 was Butte's Nicole Hunt who had won the three previous Montana Cups, but a recent foot injury relegated her to walking today's course.

With Hunt out of action, Vonda Garcia of the Kalispell team took the early lead on the gradual uphill for the race's first 2 kilometers. Ten years ago, Garcia set the University of Montana's mile record at 4:36, and now she coaches cross-country at Whitefish High School. Her pre-race plan was to hang back and use her devastating finishing speed to secure a victory as she had in winning the 1995 Montana Cup, but she immediately found herself abandoning that strategy in favor of a fast pace to string out the other contenders. Initially, this strategy worked as Garcia's only company was her Kalispell teammate, Lisa Kline. Kline also faded as the fast pace carried them into the course's more steep and rugged loop section.

Only Bozeman's Kara Crisifulli remained within striking distance of Garcia when the runners emerged from the forested terrain of the Scratch Gravels. Crisifulli moved to catch the front running Garcia with only two downhill kilometers remaining. Crisifulli continually cut Garcia's lead until the two were nearly even with only one kilometer remaining. Unfortunately for Crisifulli, she had misjudged the distance to the finish, and her surge had left her short of energy to match Garcia's powerful kick. Garcia reacted decisively to Crisifulli's challenge by pouring on the speed to win by 13 seconds.

Garcia reported that she rarely trains seriously at this time in her running career. "I just run a little with my kids at the school, and I run with my dogs too. Running with my dogs is good training for this course, though, because my house is in the hills, so I run hills like this everyday."

Helena's Jennifer Pearson finished in third place 21 seconds behind Garcia, helping her team to claim the coveted Montana Cup traveling trophy. Helena's depth was the key to their first ever victory, as they placed five runners among the top eleven finishers. Helena scored 26 points in victory. Kalispell took second with 36 points, and Butte took third with 63 points.

The men's race started at 1:00 p.m. on Saturday but its results were not completely decided until Sunday morning. The confusion started when Missoula's Michael LaForest charged into the lead for the race's first 2 kilometers. Shortly after that, the racers entered the course's more difficult section where LaForest was quickly passed by several runners, including Kelly Fulton of Billings. As Fulton passed, LaForest became upset and began to curse loudly. The two runners remained close together for the rest of the race until Fulton (4th) finally pulled away to beat LaForest (6th) in the last section of the race.

LaForest's loss to Fulton caused his temper to flare again, and again he directed profanities toward Fulton as well as race volunteers who were manning the finishing shoot. LaForest's out-lashing caused race officials to disqualify him for unsportsmanlike conduct. LaForest later apologized for his outbursts but his disqualification stood, leaving the Missoula team one finisher short of the required five necessary for team scoring. The criteria for scoring in this unusual situation were not immediately known, causing the team standings to be calculated in error at the awards ceremony. Bozeman was incorrectly announced as the winning team, just a single point ahead of Helena. The Bozeman team took the Montana Cup home with them, believing that they had successfully defended their 1999 victory.

The Montana Cup Rules Committee (Tony Banovich & Dave Coppock of Billings, Vonda Garcia of Kalispell and Ray Hunt & Nicole Hunt of Butte) later decided on a three to two vote that all Missoula runners must be removed from team scoring. After the Missoula runners were removed, Bozeman and Helena were tied with 42 points apiece, but Helena was awarded the tie-breaker by virtue of their sixth runner's two second victory over Bozeman's sixth runner.

The men's individual results were much less complicated. Helena's Pat Judge was the first to pass LaForest in the Scratch Gravels, and Judge pushed the pace up the steep hilly portion of his home course. Judge's strategy was clearly designed to shake off the pursuit of several fast finishers who were lurking in the trail-pack. The strategy proved largely successful, but Billings' Tony Banovich was able to stay within 50 meters of Judge throughout the hills. Fifty meters still separated Judge and Banovich when they emerged from the hills and started down the 2-kilometer stretch leading to the finish, but Banovich's reserve speed proved superior as he reeled Judge in and passed him with 1½ kilometers to go.

Banovich, who stretched his final lead over Judge to eight seconds, later said that he expected Judge to try a front running strategy. He also felt confident about winning if he could "maintain contact on the uphills". Despite his resolve, Banovich admitted that at the race's two thirds mark he had lost contact with Judge and that he had nearly given up hope of winning, but that shortly after that he sensed Judge's lead beginning to shrink. Banovich said "I was able to overcome Pat's lead today because I am really sharp from running cross country races every two weeks this fall."

Banovich credited Judge with making the race an honest effort, "You always know when Pat's entered in a race that you are going to have to run yourself sick to stay near him, and if you don't stay near him, you will not catch him. The guy might get tired toward the end of a race, but he will always gut it out all the way across the finish line."

Judge's 2nd place effort was later rewarded when his Helena team was belatedly awarded the tie-breaking victory. The Helena team may now reclaim the Montana cup from Bozeman and hold it for one year. Getting the trophy back will not be easy. Bozeman's team organizer, Mark Slater, said "[Helena] can only have the Cup back if they can pry it out of my cold, dead, bloody fingers".

- Ray Hunt, Montana Cup Results Coordinator