

## Missoula Teams Most Horse-Like

Juniper Hill Farm's steeplechase course, Helena – Men's and women's teams from Missoula swept the team titles at the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Montana Cup. The races were run in the hills above Hauser Lake. The course and all of its barriers were designed with horses in mind, so it was a challenging setup for human runners.

More than a hundred runners completed two 2.5K loops over rugged terrain with four barriers to jump on each loop. A log wall of about knee-height was the first barrier. The second barrier was a gravel pit with another log wall to leap when exiting the pit. A waist-height log that had to be hurdled (or cleared in some way) immediately followed the pit. And, the last obstacle was a chest-height A-frame wall that sat over a barbed-wire fence. The four barriers were all placed in the first half of each loop, and the loop's second half was a combination of grueling up-hills and rolling down-hills on trails that passed by sagebrush and prickly pear patches.

The course offered a true taste of cross-country running, and, *after* completing it, many race participants expressed their gratitude to the meet director, Patrick Judge. Judge, who placed 15<sup>th</sup> in the men's race, wasn't as enthusiastic. He looked out over the calm waters of the Missouri river and said "I could be sailing on a nice day like this; that sport is much easier than running on this course."

The course wasn't all that provided the day's excitement. Missoula teams dominated both men's and women's races. At noon, the men's race started with a whistle from Bill Gilbert the legendary Helena High School cross-country coach. The course narrowed quickly after the start, prompting many runners to jockey for front running positions before the impending obstacles. Tony Banovich of Billings, last year's champion, was not present due to his son's emergency appendectomy the night before. Missoula's Tim Briggs did make it to the race.

Briggs won the Big Sky Conference Championship in the 10,000m run while competing for the Montana Grizzlies in 1999, and he used his championship race savvy to hold back his pace in the early going before reeling in the early leaders by the end of the first loop. Briggs said that the early pacing was "way too fast for me, so I just hoped it would eventually slow down". It did. Briggs ran the second loop comfortably ahead, coasting to a 30 second win.

Briggs now owns his own excavating business in Missoula and he keeps up his training in his scarce free time. He and his Missoula training partners combined to dominate the other city teams entered in the race. Missoula's next four runners grouped to the front of the race, placing in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup>. They won with 22 points, easily outdistancing Helena (43) and Butte (65).

Bozeman's scoring chances took a blow when their top runner, Scott Creel, was called away to a family emergency just before the race. Creel's absence left Bozeman one short of the minimum for team scoring. Bozeman's Elisha Mann and Mark Slater helped compensate their team's disappointment by winning individual awards as top Junior and Master runners, respectively.

Missoula's victory was even more lopsided in the women's race. Their top five runners placed 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> to total 21 points. A very good Bozeman team was second with 50 points, and Butte was a surprising third place with 62 points. Butte's team placing was helped by the Susan Kaluza, who won the Masters' award, and by Elisha Cassan who was the Junior award winner.

Missoula's Mountain West Track Club added an international flavor to the Missoula city team. Missoula's first two women, Nathalie Cote' and Sue Binne, are national caliber Canadian runners who reside in Missoula while sponsored by the track club. Cote' proved herself strong at all aspects of cross-country. She rolled to an early lead on a downhill, she cleared all barriers with convincing ease, and then she powered away from the other runners on the up-hills.

This year's Montana Cup had more entrants than ever before, and the Helena Running Club's organization of the event also reached new heights. Huge thanks are due to all of the Club's members, especially Patrick Judge who directed the Montana Cup for the last two years, and to Martin Miller, Kathy River, Ann Seifert, Jeff Thomas, and Jennifer Thomas, all of whom dedicated much time, effort and innovative thinking to planning the events. They have truly brought the Montana Cup into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by introducing, among other things, team jerseys and European-style course design.

The Helena group was also instrumental in developing an operating plan for forthcoming Montana Cups, as well as a rotating location schedule, which includes regular stops in all of Montana's seven major towns for future races. The Montana Cup will move to Bozeman next year in the first year of the new schedule.

I hope you had a surprising blast of fun at this year's race, and I hope you left the race thinking to yourself "that course was excellent, exciting & beautiful!" See you in Bozeman next fall.

- Ray Hunt, MT Cup Results Coordinator