

Rice & Creel Over Easy

East Gallatin Park, Bozeman – The Missoula women’s team and the Bozeman men’s team secured their respective Montana Cup traveling trophies at the 11th annual Montana Cup cross country meet. The meet annually brings together teams from Montana’s major towns. Both the women’s and men’s 8K races were run over a European-style cross county course, that included six 2-high straw bail jumps, two patches of slag timber to cross and multiple other log jumps.

Meet Director, Marcus Engler, gave strict instructions that all obstacles were to be negotiated rather than avoided, and that anyone caught circumventing the obstacles would be disqualified. The course offered a true taste of cross-country running for more than one hundred competitors. After the men’s race, Bozeman’s Doug Neil, who finished ninth, said that he enjoyed this race more than traditional races where you “just run”, because the barriers kept him focused on each immediate challenge.

At noon, the women’s race started with a shout of “GO!” from Engler. Many runners jockeyed for the front before they entered the narrow trail that circled the park’s lake where passing was more difficult. Even in this early stage of the race, it was evident that Missoulians were going to dominate the team competition as they grouped all of their five scoring runners among the first ten individuals.

Missoula’s Kelly Rice, who finished a successful collegiate career as a steeple-chaser for the University of Montana last spring, remained at or near the lead in the early stages of the race. Rice maintained a steady pace that strung out her competitors in the first third of the race. Only Butte’s Nicole Hunt was able to continue running with Rice, but Rice was still racing within her comfort zone, as she demonstrated by casually conversing with Hunt as they ran.

Rice showed her endurance as she pulled steadily away from all runners over the last third of the race, increasing her victory margin to 35 seconds. Her time was 32:17. Rice said that having run the steeplechase in college helped prepare her for the race’s obstacles, but her endurance came from running about 60 miles per week in preparation for next month’s Seattle Marathon. Rice and her teammate, Abby Anthony (6th place), are both planning to race that marathon, and their common goal time is 3:15.

Nicole Hunt, who recently ran a marathon of her own, did hold second in today’s race, and Bozeman’s Ann Sorenson made a late surge to power past several other runners and into third place.

Five Missoula women finished in the top eight positions, totaling a low score of 24 points. Missoula continued their domination of this race, as they secured their second consecutive victory and sixth out of eleven. A talented Bozeman team scored nearly double the winning amount for second place, and teams from Butte, Great Falls, and Helena followed in that order.

Other individual awards for females went to Bozeman’s Jackie Provance who was the first masters’ finisher in 35:01 (7th place overall), and to Great Falls’ Rikka Strong who placed first among youths in 35:53.

Kelly Rice currently holds employment in Missoula at a specialty running store and as an assistant coach for distance runners at Hellgate High School.

Like Rice, the men’s individual champion, Scott Creel, coaches runners. Creel is a professor at Montana State University, and he assists with coaching the university’s cross-country team. Also like Rice, Creel was more than a match for his competition. After his race, Creel said that his race plan had been to hang back a little in the early going, but when he came to the course’s first slight uphill, he changed his mind. He said that he was feeling good, so he shifted to a front-running strategy to make the pace “grind on” the other runners.

It quickly became a two-man race, as Missoula’s Brandon Fuller stayed in tow, just off Creel’s shoulder. Fuller is a nationally ranked triathlete who competes for Missoula’s Team Stampede, and his strength in the triathlon is his running. But soon, Creel’s grinding pace overwhelmed Fuller too, and Creel stretched his lead for a 37 second victory, finishing in 27:24.

Creel’s grinding style is nothing new to Bozeman area runners who know him as “King of the Ridge.” He is undefeated in Bozeman’s well-known Bridger Ridge Run, and last spring he set the course record for the exceedingly rugged 19+ mile wilderness race at just under 3:10. Another thing that Creel has grown famous for is pushing himself to the point of illness. It is common for him to ‘heave’ during or immediately after a race. Today’s race was no exception, as his effort caused him to revisit the two slices of toast and a donut that he ate for breakfast.

Immediately after Creel surged ahead in today’s race, the defending Cup championship team from Missoula started to matriculate at the front of the chase pack. Their first three runners occupied second, third and fourth, and it seemed that they would pick up where their women’s team left off, but it was not to be. Creel’s golden-clad Bozeman teammates used pack running, as well as their home course advantage, to overcome Missoula’s efforts. Creel headed the Bozeman team in a 1, 6, 7, 8, 10 finishing order for a winning total of 32 points. Missoula finished second with 51 points, followed by Butte, Helena, and Great Falls.

At first glance, the men’s masters race might have appeared to be tightly contested, as a pack of four fine masters runners waged battle over the final section of the course. Bob Boland of Great Falls emerged from that group to finish 13th overall in 29:30. Most years Boland’s superb effort would have been more than enough, but this was the year that Creel turned his 40th birthday, and so he took the masters honor as well. Matt Winter of Billings was the first placed junior runner, finishing 5th in 28:25.

Huge thanks are owed to Bozeman’s Big Sky Wind Drinkers for applying so many special touches to the event. Double thanks are due to Marcus Engler who directed the race in his normal enthusiastic manner. Organizing committee members, Celia Bertoia, Robbi Colvin, Kay Newman, Martin Rollefson, and Cathy & Bob Wade were all heavily involved in planning the events and for making them happen on race day. Mark Slater really put his back into setting up the course and it’s many obstacles for our enjoyment. Many other club members volunteered to make this event go. I can’t name everyone who deserves naming here.

The Wind Drinkers did set a high standard for the Rim Runners to shoot for next year when they host the Montana Cup in Billings. I’ll see you there.

- Ray Hunt, MT Cup Results Coordinator