

Great Falls, the “Windy City”

Rainbow Falls, Great Falls – High winds buffeted a record number of one hundred thirteen participants at the 13th annual Montana Cup cross-country meet. The Helena women’s and men’s teams blew away their competition to claim both Montana Cup traveling trophies. This meet annually brings together teams from Montana’s major towns. This year’s races were run on a hand-mowed, 8.3K loop over the grassy bluffs, and through the steep gullies and ravines that skirt the Missouri River. Co-Meet Directors (and mowers) Bob Boland and Jacquie Maillet put on an excellent meet, and their ambitious efforts were highly visible and appreciated. Especially appreciated today was the giant tent that they set up for shelter!

The women’s race started shortly after noon, with a blast from Great Falls High coach Bob Stingley’s pistol, and a wave of blue-clad Helena runners took immediate control. At the front of the blue wave was Helena’s Sabrina Monro who used an unusually high, full-arm rotation to help control her momentum, as she plummeted down the first hill with a gusting wind pushing from behind. Monro is known as a powerful harrier from her outstanding running accomplishments in high school at Boulder and, more so, from her second place finish at the 2000 NCAA cross country championship while competing for the University of Montana. Monro explained that her high arm carriage “helped me relax and to control my steps in the wind”.

Monro also controlled the race throughout, as she cruised to nearly a 45 second advantage at the half-way point, before turning back into the wind for the push to the finish. Tailing Monro from a distance, were two other fine runners who had also separated themselves from the chase pack. Four-time Cup champion, Nicole Hunt of Butte was second to the windy turn, but shortly thereafter Bozeman’s Dani Salois-Shahan (Salois pronounced ‘sal-oh-ay’) overtook Hunt. Helena’s blue wave came next, with five more runners in the top ten positions, and barring disaster, the team trophy was already won.

Monro stretched her lead even more on the return trip. She sped efficiently up the last big hill (titled “Kill the Race Director Hill”) and on through the wind to finish one minute twenty clear of Salois-Shahan. Monro said that she “was exhausted and felt horrible for the last two kilometers”. She may have been exhausted but no fatigue was evident. Monro shouted “Its Soo Windy!!!” as she blasted through the violently fluttering finish tape in 33:34.

Monro first competed in the Montana Cup as a seventeen-year-old high school phenomenon in 1997, and she placed eighth in that race against a deep and talented field on a challenging 7.5 K course in Butte. After that race, Monro told a Butte newspaper reporter that she had raced poorly because she was not suited for running such a long distance. When reminded of that ironic quote, Monro stated, “I was dumb. I also said I would never run a 10K, but then I did, and I loved it. I don’t know what distance I’m best at. I plan to keep training and raise my ability to race *all* distances”.

Until recently, Monro lived and trained in Eugene, Oregon, but in July she moved back home to Montana City. Her current stay in Montana will be brief. She has been selected to race for the Michigan-based, and nationally renowned, Hanson’s running team. Monro will officially join the club after this holiday season, and her initial training focus there will be to make the US 8K team for *World Cross*. And should Monro fail to make that team, she plans to compete in the Boston Marathon. Boston would be Monro’s second marathon. Earlier this month, Monro competed in the Portland Marathon where she was the third female finisher in just under 2 hours and 51 minutes.

Monro led the Helena women to an overpowering team victory with only 26 points. So deep with talented runners was Helena’s blue wave that they would have won even if their top four finishers had been removed from scoring. Bozeman and Butte followed with 61 and 63 points, respectively.

Helena achieved another historic first today, sending its teams to the meet on a chartered bus. The Helena bus rolled into the parking lot, and twenty women and twenty men poured out of it like ants arriving at a windy picnic. When asked the secret of her team’s success, Helena’s Jennifer Thomas replied without delay “Pat... I mean Rick Judge”. Thomas explained that Patrick Judge had been the driving force behind stimulating intense interest in the event, and that Judge had also courted sponsors to make the team’s bus financially feasible. She added that the charter had cost \$400.

More information is necessary to explain Thomas’ comment about “Rick Judge”. In the week prior to the race, an Internet hoax was circulated, claiming that Judge had been banned from running in the Montana Cup as part of his punishment for sneaking over to Great Falls to practice the course in advance. And later, the hoax was perpetuated when it was reported that Montana Governor Judy Martz had overturned Judge’s ban in favor of an alternative punishment. That alternative was that Patrick Judge had to remove the P, A, and T from his first name, and to thereafter be known as Rick Judge. Judge took the tongue-in-cheek humor in stride, and he persevered under adversity to organize a championship men’s team.

The men’s race started at 1:15 p.m., and it provided much more suspense than the women’s had. The individual race was a sea-saw affair for the first half, as last year’s runner-up, Leif Seed of Missoula, took advantage of a fierce tailwind to push the pace. Jeb Myers of the Kalispell team and Bozeman’s Kevin Grigg were never far from Seed’s shoulder, and several other runners were strung out behind in close proximity. Immediately prior to the halfway turnaround, the racers descended the extremely steep “hesitation hill” with caution before turning sharply back into the wind.

This is where Grigg asserted himself. Grigg’s hard and constant pace into the surging head wind created a decisive break that separated him from the other racers just when they were trying to form small groups for protection from the wind. Grigg’s proved his fitness, bucking the wind alone, as he continued to pull away over the remainder of the course for a 37 second victory in 30:13. Grigg somewhat downplayed the course’s difficulty, saying, “this is not as hard as the hill climb in Jackson, and I have run a cross country race that had hills even tougher than these”, but he added that he enjoyed the concept of the race having ‘open’ runners come together to represent their towns.

Grigg, originally from Soda Springs, Idaho, moved to Bozeman two months ago for a job at a business called West Paw Design. Grigg recently earned a Chemical Engineering degree from the University of Minnesota, and he is pursuing a career in that field, but wants to stay in or close to Bozeman. Grigg said that he “trained with, but not as part of, the Golden Gopher cross-country team” at Minnesota, and he credited the endurance training that he did there as the reason for his victory today. He added that he prefers racing on the roads and he feels most comfortable racing distances 10K or longer.

Behind Grigg, a tight race unfolded. The wind and drafting techniques played equalizers, offering as many as eleven other runners a chance to be at or near the front of the chase-pack in the final kilometers. Jeb Myers (second) and Bozeman’s Jon Wirth (third) pulled away from that group on the brutally steep uphill near the finish. The team title was not so easy to sort out.

Missoula placed three runners in the top ten, and Helena, Bozeman, and Kalispell each placed two there. The title was decided by team depth, and Patrick Judge’s Helena squad had the best of that, placing six runners in the first sixteen scoring positions. Helena narrowly overcame Bozeman by a score of 54 to 58. Missoula (84) and Kalispell (87) slipped back to third and fourth.

Monro’s and Grigg’s victories were honored with the awarding of yellow jerseys. In age groups, Jessica Sargent (7th) and Jon Metropoulos (13th) of Helena were the highest placing youths. Butte’s Susan Kaluza (6th) and Billings’ Tony Banovich (11th) won masters, and Eddi Walker (34th) of Butte and John Alke (40th) of Helena placed highest in the super-masters category.

Members of the Kalispell team announced that they would take their turn to host the Cup next fall (keep an eye out for Rick up in the Flathead!).