

New Older Cups

Herron Equestrian Park, Kalispell Forty-plus-year-old “masters” runners bolstered the record number of finishers to 128 at this year’s 14th annual Montana Cup cross-country meet. The masters crowd had gathered anticipating the first ever “Masters’ Cup” races, which were run within the larger “open” races. The encompassing open races brought together teams from Montana’s major towns to compete for the Montana Cup traveling trophies, and those trophies were claimed by Kalispell’s males and by Missoula’s females. Helena women and Butte men took the Masters’ Cups.

The idea for a Masters’ Cup had been contemplated for a number of years, and this year it was created after Helena’s 58 year-old Bill Schneider made a moving request for more attention to be given to +40 runners at the Montana Cup. Schneider’s Helena teammate, Jeff Thomas, described Schneider as “passionate about running” and “influential for many years in developing Montana races, particularly in Helena.” Thomas recounted some of Schneider’s previous efforts in helping to create the present-day Mount Helena Run, the Great Divide Hill Climb, and also in bringing the Governor’s Cup road races to Helena.

Schneider’s idea was discussed in depth during an August training retreat that was attended by about twenty runners who form the core of the Montana Cup’s organizational group. Masters’ Cup rules and scoring procedures were clarified and it was decided that all masters must wear an “M” on their backs to be visibly identifiable by other masters within the open race. Finding suitable Masters’ Cup trophies, which will travel from year to year among winning teams, was the special assignment of Billings master, Tony Banovich. Banovich reported a fruitless search of antique stores for symbolic items “like economy-sized *Milk-of-Magnesia* jugs,” before locating two tarnished and nicked-up old brass flowerpots, each of which he had mounted as a trophy cup.

Meet Directors Kent Hoffmeyer and Jeb Myers heaped prizes and awards, including the old-brass-cups, upon contestants during today’s proceedings, which were widely enjoyed by participants on an afternoon that was damp from the previous night’s rain in this lush corner of the Flathead Valley. The races were run on a 7.6K, three-loop course that toured the equestrian park’s grassy meadow and adjacent timbered side-hill. Each race started with a flat 1.5K grassy meadow loop, followed by two 3K loops that also included the side-hill section. The side-hill featured what Hoffmeyer called a “two phase hill” with a 400-meter phase of gradual climbing punctuated by a brief swale, before the final steep 400-meter phase at a 5 to 6% pitch. After cresting the hill with quads groaning, runners veered sharply downward over the wet but firm soil of the rough single-track leading back into the meadow. There was also one log jump on each loop.

The men’s race started minutes after noon, with a pistol shot, and the individual race was virtually never in doubt as Missoula’s Casey Jermyn bolted away from the starting line with command. Jermyn was making his second appearance in the Montana Cup (he also won the 2003 Montana Cup). Today, Jermyn won by building a huge early lead before the 3K mark upon the crest of the first hill and then by gliding through the rest of the race with considerable ease. Jermyn was a many-time Big Sky Conference champion at various running distances before graduating from Montana State University last May. Immediately after graduation, Jermyn moved to Portland to take work as a shipping broker. He stayed there until September, and then he decided that he was not comfortable with the cities’ hustle and bustle, and its negative impact on his running.

In September, Jermyn’s high school teammate, Anders Brooker, drove to Portland and helped Jermyn move to Missoula. Brooker, who coincidentally organizes Missoula’s Cup team, also hired Jermyn at his *Runners’ Edge* store on North Higgins Avenue in Missoula. Also working at the *Runners’ Edge* is Montana’s world-class miler, Scott McGowan, and Jermyn and McGowan are often training partners. Jermyn’s next racing goal is the US *World Cross Trials* in the late winter in New York. That race will select the US National team who will compete at *World Cross* in March.

Following about 50 seconds behind Jermyn, today, was the beginning of a victorious five-man pack of Flathead-area runners who were representing the Kalispell team. Ronan high schooler, Michael Fisher led that pack with his third place finish. Fisher was one week removed from leading his high school to victory in the State Class “A” championship in a race that he lost the individual title by only one second after a spirited homestretch dual. And again today, Fisher came up just short in a finish sprint for second place against Billings’ post-collegiate distance ace, Kelly Fulton, who is known for his powerful race finishes. Fisher’s third place finish started an avalanche of Kalispell-area runners across the finish line among the first nine racers (Jeb Myers, Browning, 4th; Logan Torgison, Polson 6th; Tom Myers, Browning, 8th; and Brian Suttle, East Glacier, 9th). Kalispell’s dominant winning score of 25 points was less than half that of second place Helena. Kalispell team organizer Jeb Myers credited the influx of high school runners as the key for his team winning the Cup.

Butte men also moved ahead of their competition in Masters’ Cup scoring, winning for the first time ever the right to scratch their city’s name into one of the meet’s traveling trophies. Their margin of victory was 29 to 44 over Helena.

The women’s race started much the same as the men’s had, with Butte’s four-time former champion, Nicole Hunt leading the race comfortably, and with the Missoula women making a strong looking, four runner pack at the very front of the chase pack. Hunt, having recently placed fourth in the US national marathon championships in Minnesota, circled the first loop cautiously while waiting to see how her post marathon legs would hold up under race conditions. Her legs passed the test, giving her confidence to surge when she reached the first uphill. Hunt’s surge put her ahead by more than 50 seconds after the first hill loop, and it put the individual title out of any other runner’s reach. Hunt finished in 32:33, and Helena’ mountain-running specialist, Michele Bazzanella, followed with some hill surges of her own to break through Missoula’s quartette to capture second place in 33:42.

Hunt raced her recent marathon in 2:43:23, bettering the 2008 Olympic Trials qualifying standard in that event. Hunt placed eighteenth in the 2004 ‘Trials’ marathon, and her long term goal is to better that finish with a top-ten placing in 2008. With a short history of only four competitive marathons, Hunt plans to race a couple more marathons in the next year to gain valuable experience, and to get a sub-2:40 PR. That is a time that she knows she must also run at the Trials to earn a top-ten finish.

Top-ten finishes were no problem for the Missoula women today. Former University of Montana runner Kelly Rice recently returned to live in Missoula after a two-year absence. When Rice left Missoula in 2003, she was the reigning Montana Cup champion. Her return for a third place finish today was well timed to help the Missoula team seize the Montana Cup as they have six times previously. Rice’s efforts were complimented by low scoring teammates who placed fourth, fifth, and sixth. That group included Linsey Pickell, Emily Herndon, and Julie Ham, respectively. Missoula’s fifth runner, Molly Zelif, also achieved a high placing in fifteenth to give her team a 33 to 44 victory over second place Butte.

Helena women insured that their city would not be shut out of the team awards when they picked up the Masters’ Cup after their 20 to 38 win over Butte.

The top seven finishers in each race received a select piece of pottery as an award for their places on the “All Montana team”. Similar awards were given to age group winners: Michael Fisher (3rd) of Kalispell and Helena’s Jessica Sargent (9th) who were the highest placing youths. Butte’s Ray Hunt (7th) and Michelle Richardson of Helena (7th) won masters, and Butte’s Don Sundberg (27th) and Eddi Walker (33rd) placed highest in the super-masters category.

Also this week, the two existing members of the Montana Cup Hall of Fame discussed and then voted to support a Hall of Fame nomination for Missoula’s Montana Cup legend, John Hartpence.

The Butte team will host the Cup next fall on the weekend before Halloween. We’ll see you there.

- Ray Hunt, Montana Cup Results Coordinator