

Montana Cup Returns to Birth Place

Missoula. *Run Wild Missoula* hosted the sixteenth annual Montana Cup cross-country meet on the University of Montana Golf Course ... sort of. The day started off with Meet Director (who was also Missoula's team organizer) Anders Brooker practicing pre-Halloween trickery on some city teams who were commuting to the Garden City for the meet. Brooker used pre-meet information to direct more than half of the teams to a false meet location that was eight kilometers away up Pattee Canyon, where a posted sign read: "Mt Cup Trick or Treat? In the spirit of the Mt Cup, you were tricked into thinking the course would be here! The race is actually at the U of M Golf Course!"

The reference to the "the spirit of the Mt Cup," likely referred to the meet's tradition of keeping the exact course layout secret until race morning.

Teams from Helena and Missoula as well as some individuals from the Bozeman and Kalispell regions were warned about the ruse, while the remaining teams were left scrambling, in their search for the meet's true location. Many tricked runners and most treated runners seemed to take the course change in stride, and despite the hoax, a record number of men (129) and women (96) did eventually find their way to the starting line in time to race on a calm and warm afternoon.

The Big Sky Conference cross-country championships were also held at the University Golf Course earlier the same day, and the college men's 8K race course doubled as the route for the Montana Cup. Interestingly, for comparison's sake, the college men's winning time on the course was posted by Northern Arizona University's (and potential 2008 USA Olympian) Lopez Lomong who finished in a very relaxed looking 23:51. Lomong, who is one of the surviving "lost boys" of the genocidal conflict that has marred his native African country of Sudan, spoke to the *Missoulian* newspaper after his eased up victory, saying "When I am running and I see all of these fields, the hills, the mountains, it's a great place. It's a very fast, well-planned course. I felt great."

That "great place" that is the University Golf Course was also the 1992 birth place of the Montana Cup, but the meet had not returned to its original home in the twelve years since an extended host-city rotation cycle was started for the event. But, just like those early years of origin when the Montana Cup was contested in Missoula, the Missoula teams again horded the team trophies by winning all but one. Missoula won both the open divisions for men and women, and their 40+ women added the Master's Cup title. Bozeman's masters men broke up Missoula's trophy "sweep" by taking the Master's Cup. Missoula placed second in that category.

The men's Cup race started first at 1:30 p.m., and the individual race quickly developed into a dual between two steeple chase runners. Missoulian Jason Walker, a recent transplant from Eugene, immediately surged away from a strong trailing pack, building a twenty meter lead in the first kilometer. Walker, a graduate of Humboldt State University in California, possesses a 3000 meter steeple chase PR of 8:58 from 2002, and he had also run 5000 meters in 14:34 earlier this year. Walker used his current high level of fitness to maintain an 8-second lead gap at the top of the big hill past 2.5K, but it was about this time that the eventual winner, Great Falls' Zack Strong, realized that Walker's ability was not to be taken lightly. Strong who also possesses a fast steeple chase PR of 9:03 from 2005, later related that he had started to regret his cautious decision not to match Walker's initial tempo.

Strong graduated from Great Falls High School in 2001 when he placed fifth in that year's State high school cross-country championship which, coincidentally, was won by today's fifth place finisher, Seth Watkins of Kalispell. Strong, now an Ivy League grad, reports having held strong post-high-school reservations about leaving Montana to attend what he termed "a silly, preppy, east coast school," but he changed his mind after visiting Dartmouth in Hanover, NH. Strong says he was highly impressed by the school's lush deciduous setting and by its "phenomenal" track & field coach. Strong added that while attending Dartmouth, he had learned to truly love the sport of running. Strong also related that although he remembers enjoying his entire college experience, it was there that he grew to understand how special Montana is to him, but he still was not quite ready to return home. Strong spent one post-collegiate year immersed in the northern culture of Iceland, where he spent the final three months of his stay working on a dairy farm. He described his time at the dairy as a deal that had him doing whatever type of manual labor was demanded of him in exchange for his host family speaking nothing other than the Icelandic language to him.

Upon his return from Iceland, Strong began Law School at the University of Montana where he is currently in his second year of three. It was in law school where Strong met Bozeman native Mike Wolfe, who is a two-time USA champion in the 50-mile trail run. Strong and Wolfe became training partners who currently find time to run about 70 miles per week while exploring the extensive mountainous trails at Missoula's Mount Sentinel, Mount Jumbo, and the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area during Wolfe's "off season."

Strong felt that it was his recent mountain training that developed the climbing power that he used to overcome Walker's lead, today. Strong said that he was able to gain on Walker on the uphill grades. Strong added that he "snuck up on [Walker] on the last big hill with about a mile to go, and then we both just tried to break each other the rest of the way. First he would surge and then I would. It came down to the final uphill where I was able to get a little lead, and my lead held up on the final stretch. I didn't know how far I was ahead, but I could still hear people yelling his name behind me. I'm not necessarily known as a 'kicker' but I did have a little bit left if I had needed to kick it in."

Strong, whose winning time of 26:01 finished him eight seconds ahead of Walker, said that he has no further plans to pursue steeple chasing, and on a lighter note, he vows that he is also "officially retired" from what is perhaps his strongest running event: the beermile. Currently, www.beermile.com ranks Strong as the world's 31st fastest beermiler ever with a time of 6:04. Though Strong offered an update to that listing, stating that he has a recent, unpublished result from Missoula's annual (and highly secretive) Beermile that will drastically improve his standing in that event. He claims that he finished the event in the truly supreme time of 5:49. For those who do not know, a beermile involves racing a mile on the track while chugging one whole beer before each of the four laps is undertaken, and in case you are interested in trying the event, Strong advises using the tried-and-true PBR brand of beer.

Although Strong's athletic goals are not set at this time, he does have a beginner's interest in trying his feet in ultra-marathoning, and he may enter the rugged Devil's Backbone 50-Mile race near Bozeman next summer. Prior to that, he plans to try the winter sport of biathlon, which combines intervals of XC skiing with rifle marksmanship.

The Missoula men eked out a one-point (34-35) victory in a hotly contested victory over Kalispell. With such a tiny margin of victory, one can't help but wonder if Brookers' "trick or treat?" hoax had played a roll in the win. But there can be no question about the Missoula team's excellent talent. They placed five among the top fourteen scoring runners: 1) Walker; 4) Jimmy Grant, a speedy 29 year old who recently transplanted to Missoula from the great state of Connecticut; 6) Paul Abrahamson, winner of last week's state class B title race ... in today's mini-rematch of that race, Abrahamson provided a pivotal 2-point swing for the Missoula team by again narrowly out-finishing Kalispell's Shane Donaldson; 9) Brandon Fuller, one of the all time great triathletes in Missoula history; and 14) Jake Roske, another high school senior who is likely still riding in the magic pumpkin carriage after leading his Missoula Hellgate team through an improbable, undefeated-in-Montana, wearing-of-the-glass-slippers-Cinderella-cross-country season that was capped off with Hellgate's first state championship in 35 years.

In another interesting Montana Cup sub-plot, the battle of Bozeman's national class ultra-marathoners was won by Scott Creel (45), who fended off a close challenge from Wolfe for third place overall. Creel finished in 26:44 with Wolfe only seven seconds back. Kalispell's Logan Torgison (18) won the Junior age division by placing seventh over-all with a time of 27:27. Butte's Ray Matteson (50) won the Super-Master division with a time of 28:32.

Team Master's Cup scoring was dominated by the Bozeman men who were led on the course by Creel's heroics. Off the course, it was team organizer John Zombro who managed the most impressive feat. It has long been the general consensus around the state that Bozeman possessed a great wealth of talented masters men, but also that their group lacked cohesion. Zombro single-handedly put an end to that belief by molding a team that could not be threatened by other teams in attendance. They won 35 to 54 over Missoula. Zombro enthusiastically summed up his team's performance saying, "I was both pleased and surprised that we actually won the Master's Cup... Having Scott up front and then stacking the rest of us in close in the mid-pack was a fun reminder of team xc tactics from the old days. It's pretty awesome to see all the great running produced today by the women and men of Montana. It was kind of special to see the collegiate runners in action and then do our thing on the same course. Humbling also, I might add. We're looking forward to hosting [the Montana Cup] in 2009. We probably can't top the last few years, but we'll try to make it a good event."

Soon after the last male finisher completed the course, the women's 8K started with the returning champion, Butte's Nicole Hunt, baby-stepping at the back of the pack as she continued to faithfully execute her nine month plan for healing chronic hamstring tendonitis in both legs. Meanwhile, Helena's Jennifer Thomas sprinted up front and sprung over a row of shin-high straw bails to establish what is becoming her trademark early lead in the Montana Cup. Shortly thereafter, several racers rolled past Thomas to take ultimate command of the race. The lead group quickly became a single-file procession and then it thinned even more to become a one-woman race, with Missoula's Suzanne Huse (formerly Suzanne Binne) spearheading what will undoubtedly be remembered as one of the most dominate team performances in the history of the Montana Cup.

Huse established a substantial lead before 2K and she then used the final 6K to extend her lead to an enormous 1 minute, 11 second victory over her sensational younger teammate, Caitlin Stone (17), who was fresh off a third place finish in the State "AA" Cross-Country championship last week in Helena. Huse is a national-class Canadian runner who became a resident of Missoula in 1998 when she began competing as a member of Missoula's Mountain West Track Club. Huse's highest athletic achievement has been qualifying for Canada's national cross-country squad for the long course race at the 2002 World Cross in Dublin, Ireland. Although Huse is again in training to race the Canadian Cross-Country Nationals in December, she now has more non-running commitments to balance. She is the mother of baby boy, and she is working as a Registered Dietitian, managing health and nutrition at the Missoula Early Head Start.

After Huse gave birth in November 2006, it took her 10 months to return to racing. Her new approach to training still includes some of her old routine. She still schedules at least three workouts per week with the ladies of the Mountain West Track Club, but as she explained, "My approach to training has really changed. Since I have an eleven month old son and I work, the key for me is to get quality and not all the miles, and don't over train."

Huse decided to race the Montana Cup because she said "I love cross-country" and because it was being hosted locally. She said that she found out about the course change from Pattee Canyon to the University Golf Course about a week before the race and she definitely favored switching the course. She said "I was quite happy about the change since it more closely resembles what the Canadian Cross country championships will be like."

Huse's teammates also shredded their competition. Stone's second place effort combined with three other runners in the top six scoring positions to claim a near-perfect 16 point total. Only Butte's super sophomore, Keli Dennehy was able to break up Missoula's chance for a perfect unblemished winning score. Missoula's other scoring runners were 3) Kelly Rice, a past standout steeple chase runner for the University of Montana who recently returned to Missoula; 4) Mary Thane (44), Missoula's age-division national champion in the 1500 meters; and 6) Rye S-Palen who recently won Missoula's prestigious Blue Mountain Women's 10K. It is amazing to consider that if Missoula's top four runners had been disqualified, their remaining team members would still have achieved a winning score of 38 to 52 over Helena's women.

Missoula's 40+ women fielded a full scoring team for the first time in the Masters' Cup scoring, and with Thane to lead them, they scored a 27 to 49 victory over Butte. Butte's Mary Dean (50) won the individual award for the Super Masters' division with a time of 36:19. The Missoula masters' team organizer for women, Jennifer Boyer, evaluated the Montana Cup and cross-country in general stating, "That is the first cross country race I have ever done in my entire life, and it was really fun. What a beautiful day, to boot ... I think the masters women are all fired up for next year in Helena!"

Other Montana Cup news:

Montana Cup co-founder, Diamond Jim chose this year's Montana Cup date to return from a year of traveling, only to disappear again shortly after the meet. Rumor has it that he has decided to spend some time in his old home town, Missoula.

Next year's Montana Cup will be hosted by Helena on the day after Halloween, so it seems safe to speculate that we can look forward to some more tricks. I'll see you there.

- Ray Hunt