

Bozeman Thaws for Muddy Halloween

The runners of Bozeman, headed by Meet Director John Zombro, hosted this Montana Cup cross-country meet on the serpentine ski trails adjacent to Lindley Park. The twisty-turning trails had accumulated 15 cm of snow at midweek, but a warming, south wind on the eve of the meet helped melt much of that snow in the hours immediately preceding the races. This turn of weather was good news for “mudders” who run well in slush over muck. Oddly, this was the first time in eighteen Cups that mud has been encountered on the course -- “oddly” because this meet is patterned after old-world European cross country races where anything goes and mud is commonplace. Racing shoes with long metal spikes for traction were a key to success today. Those who had long spikes could corner tightly on the multiple downhill-slanting, tight and slimy turns. Most who wore flat bottomed shoes went where gravity and inertia directed. Mother Nature’s warm wind had another unanticipated result, which was that directional markings which had been chalked on top of the snow melted into the grass shortly before the races. This fact made the act of physically guiding runners even more important, and unfortunately, the mountain bike rider who was recruited to guide the lead runners through the intricately winding route, could not stay ahead of the runners in some of the muddier sections. Left to navigate for the group, the lead runner in both the men’s and women’s races did go the wrong way. These were the first instances of runners getting lost in 18 Montana Cups, a mistake that event organizers have vowed to prevent from happening a second time. This regrettable glitch marred Bozeman’s otherwise detailed and enjoyable hosting effort.

In the men’s race, the mishap turned out to be no big deal as Alan King of Billings quickly corrected himself before regaining the lead and powering away from the other runners to claim his first individual Cup title. The lost leader in the women’s race was not so fortunate. Missoula’s Susanna Huse sped past an unmanned 90° turn, and proceeded to lead seven trailing runners across a short unmarked stretch of open field where they rejoined an earlier course loop that retraced their steps backward to the start/finish area. The front eight runners (including the top four Missoula women) were well clear of the following groups of which Helena runners populated five of the next eight. Helena team organizer and all-around good Samaritan, Rick Judge, who was cheering his team’s movement through the course, arrived at the unmonitored corner in time to redirect the ninth and subsequent runners in the correct direction. The eight misguided front runners found their way to the finish line by a route that was nearly a kilometer shorter than the planned course.

Huse who said she did not learn that she had gone the wrong way until minutes after she had finished, reflected on the mishap, saying “At one point during the race I was confused because the biker was so far away (since the race was so muddy my eyes were on the ground for much of the race), I put my arms up and looked around for someone but no one was around so I kept going the way I was going. In my opinion, there are a few reasons why we went off course; there were lots of turns in that same field so I never really knew where I was, and also because the biker wasn’t able to lead us the whole way due to the muddy conditions. In the end, I believe it is no one’s fault, these things happen.”

A widely accepted credo among road and cross country runners is that if you have a possibility of leading a race then you own the responsibility of learning the course before you start, but learning a Montana Cup course can be complicated because of the tradition of secrecy that has kept the race routes unknown until the morning of. The Montana Cup rules state that “Runners may only be disqualified, or removed from team scoring, by ruling of the ‘MT Cup Jury’ (comprised of at least 3 impartial team organizers as named by Meet Director) for ... any action that results in an unfair advantage...” The rules also state that the racecourse must be prepared in such a way that “... directional markings are obvious,” and this rule is reiterated in Montana Cup meet guidelines that advise hosts to “Lay out race course in clear and simple fashion (runners think slowly when racing fast) ... Ensure that no runner will get misdirected or lost.”

Due to the obvious advantage gained by the eight runners who mistakenly cut the course, and in light of contradictory rules related to the issue, Meet Director Zombro called together a five member jury including himself and representatives from Kalispell (Tony Banovich), Helena (Rick Judge & Jeff Thomas) and Butte (your author Ray Hunt) to decide if it was proper to include the lost runners in team scoring. After we debated and considered a wide range of excellent points, it was decided (by a three to two vote) to include the misguided runners in scoring. The Jury made an addendum about clarifying these associated rules so that it is crystal clear to future Cup runners that they will be disqualified if they gain an advantage over other runners by leaving the course for any reason. As is easy to imagine, the jury’s decision and its implications were troubling and stressful to runners on both sides of the issue. For more on this subject, see [logic behind ruling](#).

Logic behind the ruling

The following is an excerpt from Meet Director John Zombro’s written summary of the Cup jury’s balanced but controversial decision to include misdirected runners in results.

I can assure you that we had no agenda based on personal relationships or other collusion. I’ve been involved in these activities, like all of us, for most of my life, so I am quite familiar with rules and traditions. I was the one who, when faced with a call coming in over the radio that the 8 leaders in the women’s race had missed a turn and were running toward the finish, needed to be prepared to make a determination. It was impossible to re-route this group back onto the proper course based on the number of course workers we had available. It has been my personal experience and belief is that it is the responsibility of the runner to know the course, run the course, and finish appropriately, with no excuses or exceptions. However, I think this is most true when the runner has good access to the course map, the course is optimally marked, there are adequate marshals, etc. My assessment of the situation at that very moment on race day was that we had unintentionally failed the lead women in this goal. Listed below is the data that I tried to process, and take to the jury.

- 1.) While the course was well marked with yellow and blue paint, including a barrier line and several directional arrows for the men’s race, some or all of this may have been trampled from the men’s field running over it. Some of this occurred also as the course wasn’t available to us until race week due to some weather and political complications. The course was mowed only days before we could begin marking, and then it got buried under 6 inches of snow. After much deliberation, the chief of course and I elected to mark the snow, which we did liberally. Unfortunately, Friday night gave us warm winds that wiped out much of our marking. Being required to use spray chalk as it is environmentally-friendly, we attempted to re-apply the marks onto wet grass. This does not work optimally. There were also several barrier “X” formations made from stakes, but they were not excessively high. My feeling was that much of the marking which was clear during the men’s race may not have been present for the women.
- 2.) Swine flu hit several of our volunteers at the last minute, including several course marshals. Consequently, we were challenged to have every turn properly covered.
- 3.) The lead biker was struggling so much with the mud, he needed to get fairly far ahead of the runners so they wouldn’t overtake him, and had thus disappeared from sight.
- 4.) Information I received from those on the course was that these individuals had a significant lead at this point in the race and that it was fairly unlikely (although recognizably not impossible) that they would not be overtaken. Again, this information indicated that there was a high probability that the scoring of the race may not have been significantly affected.

Because of these issues, I didn’t feel that we had done an adequate job of providing a fair and clear course, which I certainly take seriously. Had we provided a simpler course that was more obvious and perhaps a map that all racers had access to prior to race day (given the nature of the course), I would have preferred to take a firmer line and disqualify the runners in question. My feeling is that we had not completely delivered on our goals, and therefore I proposed to the jury that these runners not be penalized for what I felt were our mistakes. A combination of weather and unfortunate circumstances had all combined to impede our race efforts in a way that I never wanted to happen.

This is a volunteer job, and I accepted it willingly. All of our staff were volunteers and they all worked very hard to conduct the event. I feel terribly that any of this happened, but the information above reflects what I was processing at the time. I would hate to see this great event affected negatively by this unfortunate circumstance. [Those lead runners who were caught in the middle of this unfortunate circumstance were] far ahead of the field, maxed out with effort, and making a split-second decision on a challenging course. Thank you for allowing me to explain my actions. Sincerely, John Zombro

Alan King (see [Q&A with Alan](#)), who coaches cross country at Rocky Mountain College in his home town of Billings, gained his first individual Cup title in this his third try at the event. King finished the 5.8K mudfest in 21:06. After starting conservatively while also dodging mud blobs that were launched from the shoe-bottoms of dashing junior runners, King employed a mid race surge to open a five second winning margin over second place finisher Steve Hickman of Bozeman. Only two additional seconds ticked off before Bozeman’s Nordic skiing Olympian, Leif Zimmerman finished third while leaving a roster-tail of mud behind him as he sprinted up the final sloppy slope with runners strewn in his wake.

Q&A with 2009 Montana Cup Individual Champion Alan King of Billings

Q: Congrats on winning the Cup. From the glimpses I got of you during the race, I would say that you were toying with the rest of us. You must really be in good condition. It looked like you were cruising along and then about half way you ‘dropped the hammer’ and tore away from us like a Heisman Trophy candidate.

A: Thanks for the complement. I wasn’t toying with anyone. I was actually very unsure of my fitness as I haven’t been able to run as much as I’d like. I got a stress reaction in my right foot about three weeks ago and have only been running 20-30 miles a week barefoot. It was just one of those races where you have a good performance without any explanation.

Q: Someone mentioned that you got off course during the race. What was he story behind that?

A: I was in the lead right around the 4K mark and the bike stopped at the bottom of the hill so he could be the course guide for two different areas. I was going up the right way, but as I was running it felt like we had already passed that part of the course so I turned around, as I was going back down the hill I asked the guys behind me if we took the wrong turn. They told me that we were heading in the right direction, so I turned around back up the hill. I had lost some ground on them. Luckily I kept my cool and was able to catch back up.

Q: It was Billings West where you attended high school, right? When did you graduate, and then where did you go to college and what did you study?

A: Yeah, I graduated from West in 1999, then headed off to college in Mitchell, SD at Dakota Wesleyan University. I graduated from there in 2004 with a History Degree and a Secondary Education minor.

Q: Remind me about the facts surrounding the time you spent teaching in Alaska after college.

A: I was very disappointed with my running career and didn’t want to run anymore and thought I needed to use my degree. My wife (Becca) and I graduated in May, married in June, moved to “bush” Alaska in July, and started teaching in August. Needless to say it was the busiest summer of my life. We were up there for two years in which I ran very little. I was hired as the high school teacher and Becca taught Junior High. Basically I taught all 11 high school students all subjects. I also held responsibilities of guidance counselor, cross-country coach, robotics coach, senior trip planner, and prom planner.

Q: I know you’re coaching XC at Rocky, but does Rocky have T&F too and are you involved with that? Is coaching your only job?

A: This year marks the first year of Distance Track at Rocky. At this time Rocky is focusing on the distance program and with this addition, I was also elevated to full-time coach, and am in charge of both XC and Distance Track.

Q: How do you balance coaching with training yourself?

A: This was a huge challenge the last couple of years. I was working a full time job, coaching part time, and training when I could. However, now that I am coaching full time, I have been able to run more. I also run all of the practices with my athletes and supplement my training with running a couple more times throughout the week.

Q: I heard a rumor that you run some unworldly amount of time each day. What is the truth?

A: I run 4 to 5 times a day...not really. In the base phase of my training I run 1 hour in the morning, 1 hour in the afternoon, and 2 hours on Sundays, with Saturdays racing or off. I like to try and take one day off a week when possible. This can range from 2 months to 8 months depending on what races I am planning on doing. People often ask me how many miles I run but I honestly don’t know for sure. That was one of the biggest things I changed once I started running again. I became less obsessed with the number of miles I run. It has helped me focus on how I feel rather than trying to get in a few more miles.

Q: What is the story about how you met your wife?

A: Becca and I met in the summer of 2000. I had decided on staying in Mitchell, SD to take some classes over the summer. Mitchell was Becca's hometown and she was home for the summer. We met through a mutual friend and have been together ever since.

Q: How many kids do you have and what are their ages?

A: I have a son, Hayden, who is 15 months old and about 30 other kids that range anywhere from 18 to 21 years old that are associated with my job.

Q: What has been your greatest athletic achievement in life?

A: Athletically, I have to say cracking the top 10 at the California International Marathon in 2007. It was a windy day and I was still able to reach my goal time of sub 2:30:00, which just happened to be good enough for 9th place. Of course winning Montana Cup is a pretty big achievement as well.

Q: How did you specifically prepare for this year's Cup?

A: I didn't prepare for this race at all. I ran out of a sense of "call of duty". Montana cup is such a great event and the only time where you have the opportunity to run against Montana's greatest runners. You never know who is going to be here, but the quality of competition is always good.

Q: What did you think about this year's Cup course, and are you a "mudder"?

A: I am definitely not a "mudder". I am much more of a road racer now days and enjoy being able to run fast on flat courses. However I have been running more trails the last couple of years and have incorporated trails on all of my long runs, which has definitely helped me become a stronger runner. I'm a pretty twiggy guy, which works well for flat courses. Hills, mud, and wind are very hard for me. When I ran CIM in 2007 I was right around 140 lbs, now I weigh 150lbs which has given me more strength when it comes to hills, mud and wind.

Q: What interesting tidbits do you have to share with everyone about Billings hosting next year's Cup?

A: I have a couple of ideas for some race courses, but nothing solid yet. My only goal is to not have it at Riverfront Park, but this will have to be a discussion with everyone that is a part of the Yellowstone Rumrunners and the planning committee.

The fourth male runner who crossed the finish line in 21:20 was also registered for team Bozeman, but he raced wearing the green color of Butte. That runner was Ennis' sensational Gavin Owens, the '09 State class B high school cross country champion. Owens had apparently chosen to forego wearing Bozeman's official golden color in favor of his green Ennis Mustangs uniform. This was a choice he made despite the indication on his entry form that an official team jersey was required, and also in spite of Zombro's email to team organizers and to race participants in the days leading up to the meet in which he stated "*Jerseys for late entrants: ... We are asking anyone who has registered in the last week to be prepared for this and to bring along a shirt/singlet, etc. that is the same or similar color to your team. Bozeman – gold...*" Owen's ill-fated choice of uniforms led to a rules violation appeal that was also decided by the Cup Jury, and we had no real choice but to disallow Owens' result. Owens' DQ moved Helena's John Gilboy (21:23) into fourth overall and first in the junior (0-19 years) division.

Gilboy led Helena's loaded junior men's team to a perfect score of 15 points in the Cyppee Cup competition. Gilboy, who attends Helena Capital High School, teamed with his cross-town rivals, Dan Osborne and the brothers Barker of Helena High -- younger brother Matt was the team's fifth man today, but he is fresh off his State class AA championship from last weekend. Townsend's Jager Warner was also a member of Helena's super fast quintet. The Cyppee Cup victory may have been some small consolation for Dan Osborne who tragically missed his final State cross country meet due to illness last weekend. Even with Owens' small score lost by Bozeman's open team, they still had adequate depth to secure a slim victory in the competition for the Montana Cup. Bozeman's scoring five included Hickman, Zimmerman, Christian Heck (8th in 21:36), team recruiter Dewey Peacock (10th in 21:49) & Doug Neil (15th in 22:31) who totaled the low score of 38, only five points less than the deep second place team from Helena which actually finished six runners before the winning team finished five. In the men's Masters Cup competition, John Zombro's deep and talented, home-standing squad came into the meet as twice consecutive owners of what is by far the meet's largest and shiniest trophy. It has been called the "Zombro Cup," and at over half a meter in height and nearly 7 kg, it is as impressive to behold as it is an armload to carry. Butte's masters men came to Bozeman intent on dislodging Zombro's stranglehold on the coveted and colossal cup, and they did so by stacking five runners among the top eight masters finishers. Butte's winning score of 22 points was the lowest yet recorded in the five-year history of that division, supplanting the old low mark of 29 points which was scored twice ('05 & '06) by earlier versions of the same Butte team. Bozeman also scored very low in second place today with seven runners finishing in the top thirteen for only 35 points -- nine points less than their winning total from last year. Butte master Mike Telling, who placed 2nd in the division with a time of 22:10, summed up his team's feelings well when he said "The Master's Cup is definitely a thing of beauty, very cool ... it's a great reminder of a great day of racing."

Zombro recounted the history of that Master Cup trophy since 2007 when he first led Bozeman to claim the older version of the same cup. "*I had proudly displayed [the old cup] on our counter in the lobby at work [Zombro Physical Therapy]. Vito Sinopoli had been coming in to the office and he noticed it one day and asked what it was all about. I told him that this was indeed the representation of all things excellent and relayed how our master's team had won this at the recent race. He then reminded me that trophy-making was what he did for a living and offered to build a trophy which seemed commensurate with how great I was describing the meaning of the MASTER'S CUP. I then said 'Well, we'll commission you to do so', and he replied 'No, I will donate it'. Several months later he produced what can only be described as a true masterpiece. It has been on display at ZPT ever since ... Kudos to Butte Master's men and to Vito Sinopoli. His address is on the bottom of the artwork, in case you want to contact him.*"

The female's race went off shortly after the men finished, with Sabrina Monro of Helena jacking the early pace, but Monro gave way to the intense pursuit of Missoula's '07 Cup champ Suzanne Huse shortly thereafter. Huse continued to force the tempo as she stretched her competitors out behind in single-file and she later said her race strategy "was to go out hard since that is what I will have to do at Nationals. The rest of the race was to just run strong and push myself." Huse, who is in training to compete in the Canadian Cross Country Championships, may have been so focused on executing her aggressive front running plan, that she unwittingly bypassed the unattended turn near 4.3K, and that missed turn pulled her oxygen deprived pursuers along behind. Only Huse's teammate, Megan Lerch, withstood Huse's brutal pacing attack, and Lerch then fought back to draw even and then pass near the finale of their shortened course. Their times were 21:17 and 21:22, respectively. Huse's vulnerability to being passed near the finish came because, she reported, "I was hurting and fell off the pace quite a bit." See **Q&A with Meg** for more about Lerch. Nicole Hunt of Butte won a teeth-gritting battle for third place by out finishing Bozeman's Dani Shahan. Hunt finished six seconds up on Shahan with a time of 21:33.

Q&A with 2009 Montana Cup Individual Champion Megan Lerch of Missoula

Q: Did you win the Cup? I have yet to see the race results, and I didn't see your finish....

A: I did win, but just by a little bit. And sorry that we went the wrong way! I didn't even realize we went the wrong way until I was finished. I guess Sue kind of had an idea but didn't know where or when to go back until it was too late. So again, I'm so sorry. What a mess!

Q: Where did you grow up, and what school(s) have you attended?

A: I grew up in Mullica Hill, NJ and I went to college at Towson University in Towson, MD.

Q: How would you characterize a typical training week for yourself, and how did you specifically prepare for this year's Cup?

A: I work out with a group of girls in Missoula and we do two speed workouts a week to prepare for races. Sue Huse is specifically training for Canadian Cross Country Nationals so I think we can credit her for getting us a little more ready for the MT Cup by doing lots of hills on the UM's golf course :)

Q: What is a fun fact about you that other runners would be interested to learn?

A: Yikes - I'm not too interesting :) I have a twin sister. But she hates running so we don't typically bond over long runs ;)

Q: What are you doing for a living these days?

A: I work part time in a physical therapy office and workout with Mountain West Track Club.

Q: What has been your greatest athletic achievement in life?

A: I don't know if it's the greatest, but I was able to run at Hayward Field last spring in a 5k and it was one of the most exhilarating experiences in my running career.

Q: What did you think about this year's Cup course, and are you a "mudder"?

A: I wouldn't ever consider myself a cross country runner - I much prefer the track! - but I had a great time at the Cup this year. As you know, it was extremely muddy and the conditions made it hard to go fast but it was still fun.

Q: How did your team travel to Bozeman, and what was your race strategy for the Cup?

A: Our team was made up of a group of women from Mountain West Track Club so we all drove over together strategizing the entire way about the race. :) Just kidding. We are lucky to have such a great group of girls and everyone just ran really well.

Q: I believe I heard that the Missoula women won the Montana Cup. If that is true, how do you compare your individual victory with this team victory?

A: If we did win the MT Cup, I'll be relieved because we all went the wrong way :) I'm just glad we won and we have such a strong group of ladies running. That's the most important thing in a team race :)

Lerch and Huse lead teammates Rye Palen (6th in 21:49), and Jenny Newton (8th in 22:46 -- the last to take the shortened course) to top eight finishes, and they were joined in team scoring by Aleta Jokisch (20th in 27:12) for the winning total of 37 points. September rumors that never materialized about Bozeman's women putting together a hometown all-star squad the likes of which would strike fear into the minds of all competitors, allowed Helena's women to jump into the second place team position with 49 points. Bozeman slipped down to fourth place in the open division, but made up for it in Masters' Cup scoring, where their team was led to victory by Ann Sorenson who won the division with a time of 26:20. Bozeman out-scored the defending champions from Helena 30 to 38. Helena won the females' Cyppee Cup with a perfect score of 15. No other teams had five scoring runners. Team Helena's Chiara Warner, a high school freshman who last week won the Class B high school cross country championship for Townsend, lead the way again today for the Junior females, placing 5th overall in a shortened course time of 21:43.

Thank you runners of Bozeman for giving a record number of race finishers (239) some excellent memories! Next year, the Yellowstone Rimrunners will host the Montana Cup in or near Billings on Saturday, 30 October, and rumors are already circulating about them having a course that is excellent, exciting and beautiful!

- Ray Hunt