

Of Horses and Helenans

The *Yellowstone Rimrunners* of Billings, headed by Meet Director Brad Coutant, flawlessly hosted the Montana Cup cross-country meet on the grassy foothills of the Intermountain Equestrian Center north of Billings. A 6-km race route was laid out over mowed fields and horse trails and, in true Eastern Montana fashion, the only things like trees on the course were the sagebrush. The day started mostly sunny with a soft, cool breeze, and it ended with team Helena taking a load of trophies home in their team bus.



A breeze greeted Montana Cup runners at Billings' Intermountain Equestrian Center.

The women's race started punctually at noon with Bozeman's Leigh Holleman leading Nicole Hunt of Butte and Sarah Graves of Billings ten meters in front of the chase pack which initially included 74 runners. Both Holleman and Hunt had recently turned forty years old, and Graves, 34, was twenty days removed from racing a marathon. Each of the three elder front-runners was likely aware that behind them lurked a young, but feared, kicker. The role of fast-closing-chaser was played to near perfection by Billings' sixteen year old Danielle Aragon, who at that very moment was trotting next to her teammate, Jen Reiter, in tenth place.

Hunt, flanked by Graves, moved to the front at the 500 meter mark, and it was at that same point that the race's lead horseback rider galloped her steed out in front of the runners to help guide them through the course. The idea of having a lead horse was appreciated by spectators. The horse made it easy for onlookers to spot the lead runners from across the wide and open areas of the course. Both Graves and Hunt later also expressed appreciation for the horse's ability to lead them on the correct route through rough terrain. They also noting that the horse was a little too close for their comfort at times. When they raced into a head wind, the horses' hooves churned up sand that flew into their eyes.



The women's race leaders a half km into the race were Bozeman's Leigh Holleman (gold uni), Nicole Hunt, Butte (green) and Sarah Graves, Billings (black).

The two followed the horse together for the first half of the course, but then they came to a downhill section that had spotty footing, and at that point, Hunt later related that "I hyper-extended my ankle which caused me to hesitate briefly, and at that moment Sarah took off and passed me like I was standing still." Hunt added that it seemed to her that Graves had been waiting for that moment as if it was a well practiced strategy.

Graves' chief concern a moment after her surge was that she was running so fast that she found herself contending with the horse's rear end. The horse's rider was apparently caught by surprise at Graves' dramatic increase in pace. The horse and rider eventually adjusted their pace to match Graves, who continued pushing hard the rest of the way. Graves extended her lead over Hunt to 21 seconds at the finish line, finishing in 24:24, and her mid-race surge and subsequent drive to the finish also kept her clear of Aragon, who had been stalking the two leaders when Graves made her move. Aragon caught Hunt with less than a kilometer before the finish and she wasted no time in passing. Graves was aware of Aragon's presence, and she gave a quick turn of her head at every corner that she turned to gauge Aragon's progress. In the end, Graves was able to maintain an 8-second margin of victory over Aragon.



Race winner Sarah Graves of Billings following the lead horseback rider with less than 1-km remaining in the race.

Graves finished the Chicago Marathon three weeks ago in a hot-weather-slowed time of 2:55 ... nine minutes slower than her goal, which was the US Olympic Trials qualifying standard (sub-2:46). Twice recently prior to Chicago, Graves has finished marathons in 2:47 and some seconds and she is highly motivated to erase the minute that separates her from her goal time. She will be back after it again soon when she races the Houston Marathon in January.

The one-two finish by the Billings' teammates, Graves & Aragon, gave them a great advantage in team scoring, but they did not hold their lead. Jen Reiter, who was projected by some to finish among the first ten runners, did not finish the race and Team Billings slipped into third place. Helena packed five runners (4,5,7,8,12) in the top twelve scoring positions to secure a narrow victory over Butte by a score of 36 to 43. Billings scored 47.

Helena's team victory was the first of three on the day. Their masters-division women followed up immediately, delivering a crushing defeat to all other teams, placing five runners in the top seven scoring positions. Helena's winning score was tiny (19) and their margin of victory was huge (39) over second place Billings.

Nicole Hunt was the top masters-division runner, finishing in 24:45. Hunt is also a member of the Montana Cup Hall of Fame, and she and the rest of the Hall members recently honored Helena's Ann Seifert by voting to include her among their ranks. Seifert has been a longstanding, successful Montana Cup team organizer in Helena, and her team's masterful victory this year only added to Seifert's impressive Montana Cup resume, which included many achievements and contributions. Under Seifert's leadership, Helena has now claimed four Masters' Cup titles in the sixth year of that competition's existence.



Ann Seifert (#84), the newest member of the Montana Cup Hall of Fame.

The junior females were paced by Danielle Aragon, who finished the race in 24:32, leading Billings to a six-point victory over Butte (36-42). The point swing in this close score was created by Billings' second runner, Rebekah Kirtley, who recently moved with her family from the Butte region to the Billings area.

The men's race started an hour after the women's, and the result was much the same. That is, a Billings runner won the race, and Helena used their highly populated team depth to secure first or second place in each of the three team divisions.

Alan King of Billings was pulling double duty at the meet. He was the defending champion out to defend his home turf, and when we say "home turf" we really mean it. This year's Cup was run on the equestrian training center for Rocky Mountain College, where King is the head track and cross country coach. King is also a highly involved member of the *Yellowstone Rimrunners* club, and in that role, King was the person in charge of designing and manicing the race course.



Alan King of Billings dressed for Halloween at the pre-meet packet pick-up station, but he was dressed for speed when he set foot on his home course.

After King's dominant Cup victory in last year's mud bath in Bozeman, one would hardly think that he needed more advantages this year, but one glance at the 2010 pre-meet entry list quickly altered that thought. Team Helena alone would be bringing a large handful of potential individual male champions to the meet. King's love affair with the course certainly must have added to his prowess, and it showed. Just as he did a year ago, King lingered among the large pack of leaders until past the first kilometer where he started to apply his tempo. The race was lead by Moses Leavens of Great Falls for the first 1.3 km before King passed by and then continued stretching the lead pack into single file. King's move immediately dropped all but his two most serious challengers. Helena teammates Mike Wolfe and Dominic Smargiassi both made valiant attempts to run with King, but by the race's half-way point it was already apparent that their efforts to match King would go in vain. King continued to add to his cushion throughout, finishing in 20:20 for a 16 second victory, and King did not report having troubles with following the horse.



Alan King taking the lead at ~1.3 km.

Wolfe initially looked to be King's runner-up, but Smargiassi ran the race's second half fast, reeling in and then passing Wolfe. Smargiassi finished in 20:36 and Wolfe 20:47. The two spear-headed Helena's heavily favored squad. Placing seven runners (2,3,8,9,10,12,13) within the first thirteen scoring positions, Helena was far more powerful than any other team. Helena scored 32 points. A very good Missoula team was a distant second place with 68 points. Team Helena could have dominated only a little more if they had plowed through the course in their team bus. That was a bus that was surely filled with victorious joy on the trip home.



Helena's Dominic Smargiassi led his team's placers to help secure the Montana Cup.

When asked the secret to how team Helena creates high team morale and participation in the Montana Cup, new Hall of Famer Ann Seifert's instant reply was "Pat Judge." After light prodding, Seifert expounded more details, explaining that Judge is the driving force behind the *Helena Vigilante Runners*. He is obsessed with winning the Montana Cup, and one powerful tool Judge has used to make those wins happen is weekly Tuesday-noontime organized workouts that regularly include as many as sixty runners.

It is certainly true that Pat Judge believes in the underlying mission of the Montana Cup, because he was the pencil-man in its writing, and if you have forgotten, that underlying mission is to "unite the state's widespread runners & running communities, to foster continued training & racing among Montana runners of all ages, and to leave each participant thinking ... *'that course was excellent, exciting & beautiful!'*"

Seifert continued that there are a lot of endurance athletes in Helena who come to Judge's Tuesday workouts in the spring and summer in preparation for the height of the competitive season, but once fall comes, there remains little motivation (especially for triathletes) to go to the track, except that everyone there knows that Judge is willing them to come.

Seifert said that Judge tells them "Running the Montana Cup is your duty," and that he provides a perfect balance of motivation and morale among the group. The workouts are accompanied by Judge's other motivational techniques, the most effective of which may be Judge's habit of taking attendance. Judge has fastidiously kept and publicized attendance records at the workouts for years, and now when someone completes their 100th workout the whole club has a big celebration. Seifert summed up her thoughts saying "Perfect attendance, and that hundredth time at the track has become high incentive. ... It has mushroomed ... All but one of the women on my masters team regularly attend ... Pat is not overpowering or oppressive, but everyone is aware of the goal."



Patrick Judge of Helena placed second in the 40+ age division, but his real contribution to Helena's team was as their inspirational leader.

That is only one of the many reasons why Judge has long since also been a member of the Cup Hall of Fame.

Celebrations will continue in Helena this fall season, despite their narrow loss in the Master's Cup for men. Judge had his 40th birthday prior to this year's meet, and he joined what was already a powerful team of masters men in Helena, making them the pre-meet favorites, but John Zombro was also recruiting a good team in Bozeman. Helena's Kyle Strobe (22:03) and Judge (22:09) finished the race first and second in the master's division and, at that moment, Team Helena's chances of victory seemed good. Zombro did not personally attend the meet, but his influence floated on the air. Zombro has a history of recruiting masters runners who will maintain a tight team split, and they did it again, cramming four runners between Helena's second and third, and Bozeman's five placed 4,5,6,9,11 to reclaim what is commonly referred to as the "Zombro Cup" with a 35 to 39 victory over Helena. Bozeman has now won three of the last four Cups.

Missoula's junior males (2,3,4,5,8) started a tradition of winning the Cyppee Cup with their fifth runner finishing in the eighth scoring slot for a winning total of 22 points. Missoula made the cross-state trip to win their second Cup in the first three years of the event. Helena and Billings placed second and third with 51 and 52 points, respectively.

Helena's John Gilboy claimed more hardware for his team by winning the individuals' junior division. He also finished 8th place overall with a fast finish time of 21:45. Gilboy's performance was even more impressive (from an O₂ intake viewpoint) considering that he ran the entire race wearing a black cloth wrapped, ninja-style, around his head.

Thank you *Yellowstone Rimrunners* for giving 212 race finishers some new friends and experiences. Your course and your meet management were excellent, exciting and beautiful!!

Next year, Great Falls will host the Montana Cup in their team's region on the last weekend in October.