

Montana Cup All Grown Up by Tony Banovich

Great Falls certainly lived up to its billing as Montana's windiest city as it hosted the 2011 Montana Cup cross country meet. Held at the venerable Anaconda Hills Golf Course in the community of Black Eagle (which also was the site of many high school state championship meets in the 70's and 80's) the competitors were met with mostly clear and sunny skies and warm temperatures around 10°C. But the chilling northern prairie winds came a howlin' up off the Missouri River, steadily at 11 to 15 meters per second – for reference, track times are considered wind aided at just 2 mps tailwind!!!) But, in the true spirit of Montana Cup, the harriers saw this as nothing more than another course obstacle to overcome.

Going into the race, it seemed pretty likely that the day would be a battle between the teams from Helena and Missoula. Helena has pretty well established itself as a team that dedicates a good chunk of their fall efforts towards competing well at Montana Cup – with the likes of Pat Judge, Jeff Thomas and Ann Siefert organizing weekly workouts; and, working (by hook or by crook) to fill up the team's annual charter bus with top talent from their region. But, for 2011, Anders Brooker, Meg Lerch (Anders' much better other half), Pat Cross (aka Missoula's chancellor of libations) and Jenny Newton took it upon themselves to create their own powerhouse teams.

In the end, the advantage went to the maroon jersey's of team Missoula – with wins in the Men's Open, Men's Juniors, Women's Open, Women's Masters and a 4th in the Men's Masters. Helena's blue wave waged close battles in all of the races – winning the Men's Masters (much to the delight of Pat Judge) and securing 2nd place in the Men's Open, Women's Open and Women's Masters.

The real “winner” of the day may have been the apparent full maturation of the Montana Cup as a staple on the state running calendar. In its 20th year, the event saw a registration of some 250 runners with 223 finishers (132 men and 91 women) – representing the 5th consecutive year with greater than 200 finishers. Better yet, all 7 regions fielded full teams in the men's open and masters' races; and, teams from Billings, Helena, and Missoula all traveled to the meet via charter bus. It seems that as race founder Ray Hunt starts a new young family (son Eon is 3 and wife Nicole is expected to give birth to twins within the week), his first “baby” is all grown up.

As to the individual races – they were every bit as exciting as the team competitions. The men were the first off the line with a noon start time. Favorites included 2-time defending champion Alan King of Billings, Thomas “Big Bird” Jodoio of Helena, Jimmy Grant and Mike Foote of Missoula, and Michael Fisher of Kalispell (via Plains). At about 2.5K, Alan King (just 3 weeks after the Chicago Marathon) made a break to open a gap on the field. High school junior Troy Fraley of Kalispell (5th at last weekend's state championships) tagged onto the back of King. The 7.2 km course (comprised of two loops) included a series of “zig-zags” in the middle of each loop that included 2 long, grinding hills. Through the first set of zig-zags, King and Fraley opened a gap of 10 to 20 meters on a loose chase pack that included Grant, Foote, Fisher and masters ace Scott Creel.

**Missoula's
Chris Kollar
(no. 22)
started
conservatively
but later moved
forward through
the chase-pack
until he
decisively took
the lead.**



Sitting back in about 10th at this point was new Missoula resident Chris Kollar. Having just finished up graduate school at North Carolina (where he was a member of the Wolfpack XC and track teams in his undergrad days), Kollar just moved to Missoula a couple of months ago to take a position with the University of Montana's Foundation office. Having turned his more recent racing attention to trail ultras, Kollar finished the Slick Rock 50-miler just 3 weeks ago – which turned into around a 75 mile race due to a misdirection by course officials at the 46 mile mark. That's right – with just 4 miles to go, he was sent off course and ended up with another 25 or so miles for the day. Not necessarily the best preparation for a 7,200 meter XC race. But, as the saying goes – it was what it was.

At around the 5 kilometer point Kollar had moved up to King's shoulder and they entered the zig-zag hill section for the 2nd time. On the first of the hills, Kollar opened up a bit of a gap on King; but, King pulled back to even on the downhill. On the 2nd hill, Kollar opened another gap and this one held. Running strong through the final hill and 200 meter downhill finishing stretch, Kollar ended up with a reasonably comfortable, 26 second win at 22:55.

King held on for 2nd place at 23:21 – but, without much room to spare. Running strong over the latter sections of the race, Jimmy Grant was just a second behind in 3rd (23:22) and Michael Fisher just another couple of seconds back in 23:24 for 4th. The All-Montana top 7 were rounded out by Mike Foote (23:31), Mark Handleman (23:40) and Troy Fraley (23:47).

The junior race was loaded on the front end by Western Montana harriers who had all placed high in last weekend's state championships – with a big presence of runner's from the Missoula Hellgate varsity team. With his daring front running, Troy Fraley of Kalispell (Kalispell Glacier) secured the youth-division win with his 7th place overall finish in 23:47. Closing hard over the latter parts of the race, Adam Peterman of Missoula (Hellgate) was just 8 seconds back in 2nd place (23:55). They had a pretty comfortable gap on the rest of the junior field, with a minute back to 3rd placer Drew Gottman (Missoula – Hellgate) and his 24:56. The rest of the top 7 were pretty closely bunched with only 32 seconds separating 3rd and 7th. Fourth place went to Carter Montgomery (Kalispell – Plains) in 24:57, followed by Kit Mayer (Missoula – Loyola) in 25:12, Tazio Scariano (Missoula – Hellgate) at 25:15 and Chris Herrick (Missoula – Hellgate) in 25:28. The Missoula boys won the junior team title as the only complete scoring team.

The men's masters' race saw the conclusion of fine season of racing for Bozeman's Scott Creel. After a couple of year's focusing on some other outdoor pursuits, Creel returned to the roads, tracks and (especially) trails with a vengeance in 2011. 5th at the Wulfman's CDT 14K in June and the overall winner of the Bridger Ridge Run in August, Creel went right into the mix in this race, taking a position within the front end of the open competitor's. Although falling back a bit in the 2nd half of the race, Creel finished 8th overall and won the masters race by a margin of 26 seconds over Pat Judge of Helena 23:51 to 24:17. Judge, having a resurgence in his own racing over the last couple of years, lives and breathes the Montana Cup and his strong run helped him to a 13th place overall finish. The podium finishers were rounded out by Mike Telling of Butte (via Dillon) with his 25:06. The top 7 were rounded out by Ray Hunt (Butte – 25:13), Steve Morley (Kalispell/Bigfork – 25:17), Kyle Strode (Helena – 25:40) and Peter Dan Sullivan (Helena – 25:41).

As the wind gusted some more and the men cooled down, the women's gun sounded at 1:15 p.m. The race broke open pretty quickly with Sue Huse and Kara DeWalt of Missoula and Makena Morley of Kalispell (via Bigfork) forming a threesome that was clear of the field by the 1,500 meter mark. Huse, the 2007 champion and 2009 runner up was out to keep up her string of odd year high finishes. DeWalt is a recent graduate of the University of Montana, competed in the 2011 NCAA track championships in the steeplechase and is looking ahead to the 2012 Olympic Trials. Morley is the precocious high school freshman who dominated in an undefeated high school season this past fall.

By the end of the first set of zig-zag hills, Huse and Morley had broken clear of DeWalt and it was now a two woman race. Along the back side of the course and early in the second loop, Huse opened a 15 to 20 meter lead on Morley. Moving up after a conservative 1st loop was defending champ Sarah Graves of Billings. A 2:46 marathoner, Graves was hoping that her strength would allow her to pull in the front runners in the hills during the last half of the final loop. But, Huse and Morley kept up their strong pace at the front.

Sue Huse of Missoula used a sustained effort to fatigue all her competitors, ultimately including the tenacious teen Makena Morley of Team Kalispell.



During the 2nd zig-zag downhill, Morley appeared to be closing the gap a bit. But, Huse put in a strong last move in the last uphill in the approach to 7K, and closed well into the finish. Her 26:02 gave her an 8 second advantage over the youngster Morley and her 2nd overall win in the last 5 years. Huse, a mother of two, is a native of Canada who has lived in Missoula for years and competes as part of the elite Mountain West Track Club. Focusing more on cross country and triathlons in recent years, Sue has remained competitive on the regional, national and international level.

Morley's strong finish and excellent racing tactics bode well as she prepares for the Footlocker H.S. regional cross country meet in California in early December. It also allowed her to hold a 27 second advantage over Graves (finishing 3rd at 26:35). DeWalt held on for 4th place with a 27:17 finish, just 3 seconds ahead of Jessica Johnson (Kalispell/Bigfork – 27:20). The All Montana top-7 also included Missoula's Trish Miller in 27:34 and Lisa Minnehan of Billings in 28:37.

The masters' race saw a comfortable win by Missoula's Jenny Newton. Fighting off the effects of some recent Achilles problems, Newton's 29:09 brought her a 9th place overall finish and a 77 second win over teammate Julie Gilchrist (30:26). Jennifer Burke had a breakout performance in her race as a new master, as she finished off a maroon jersey sweep of the top 3 with her 30:37. The rest of the top 7 were made up of Kristina Smith (Great Falls) in 30:45, Debbie Gibson (Helena) in 31:29, Suzie Kaluza of Butte in 32:27 and Lara Thomas (Helena) in 32:33.

Morley left no doubt about the outcome of the junior race. With her 2nd place overall finish, the 14-year old had a comfortable gap of almost 3 minutes over 2nd placer Olivia Wood of Butte (via Anaconda). Wood's time of 29:03 was still enough to secure her an 8th place overall finish. They were followed by Heather Fraley (an unaffiliated runner) in 29:29, Chiara Warner (Helena/Townsend) in 31:07, Loni Hanson (Unaffiliated) 31:18, Lizzy Narigon (Bozeman – 31:41), and Kendall Alley of Butte (33:13). The Butte girls won the junior team title as the only complete scoring team.

The race was hosted by the Great Falls running community with those efforts led by Bob Boland, Dave Chandler, Jacquie Maillet and Kristina Smith. They're to be commended for the layout of an "honest", challenging course, good music and a cozy, comfortable atmosphere for the post-race food and awards ceremony (held at the Black Eagle Community Center). The 2012 hosts (Kalispell region) have a high standard to meet in order to conduct an event equal to the quality of the last several years.

Kalispell's Tony Banovich racing the Cup.



[Ed. note: The author organized and competed for the Kalispell team again in this year's Montana Cup, and he placed 88th in the men's race. Banovich, who has the pen-name "The Muddy Buzzard," blogs regularly about the Montana running scene, and he draws his incomparable knowledge of the subject from nearly 40 years of racing on the roads, tracks and trails of Montana. You name a big race in Montana and chances are Banovich has won it at least once. He has notched his running shoes to indicate wins in the Governor's Cup, Bank Run, Ice Breaker, Montana Cup, Big Sky State Games, and the list goes on and on and on. Banovich is also a long time member of the Montana Cup Committee, and now he has been elected to join the [Montana Cup Hall of Fame](#).]