

Running on the Wild Horse Plains by Tony Banovich. Photos by Vicky & Abby Croft and Sarah Naegeli.



Plains is known for being one of the more temperate areas of western Montana. Legend has it that Native American tribes used to winter their horses on the broad plains of this portion of the Clark Fork River valley. This then led to the area being known as the Wild Horse Plains – which ultimately resulted in the town's proper name becoming Plains.

It was here; at the town's namesake golf course, that the Clark Fork Valley Running Club hosted the 21st Annual Montana Cup on behalf of the Kalispell region. And, the town's temperate climate was on full display over the course of the event.

It was a day that started out cool and wet as course set-up was completed (but lacking any of the white, fluffy version of precipitation). And, most of the teams participating experienced some form of snow and wintry conditions in traveling from their home bases. But, about the time that teams started to arrive for packet pick up, the rain lifted and things stayed dry until about 30 minutes after the awards ceremony. With the sun even peaking out a time or two – temperatures for the races were in the 5 to 8 °C range. And, with no wind, conditions were perfect to encourage some fast and furious racing.

The course was a two-lap affair, comprising a total of 6.5 km. A hill of moderate length and incline was located in the first 400 meters, followed by a short, steep hill at about 1,600 meters. From there, the rest of the course was a set of gradual inclines and declines. The footing consisted of a mix of grass, dirt, and gravel cart paths, with even a short section through a Ponderosa pine grove covered in needles. It wasn't as extreme as a few of the past Cup courses; but, it was by no means a flat, easy or rhythm type of course. It was an honest cross country course that tested the athletes; and, gave a real advantage to no one. The back and forth nature of the course also lent itself to being extremely spectator friendly – which meant lots of

cheering for all of the runners.

The women were first out of the starting boxes at 12:35 a.m. In the early stages of the race, high school phenom Makena Morley took the lead. The high school sophomore from Bigfork (running for the Kalispell team) was fresh off a win at last weekend's Class B High School State Championship. After finishing 2nd in the 2011 Cup, she was running for a win this year. Behind her, Missoula teammates Megan Brooker and Trisha Drobeck were running side by side in pursuit of Makena. At a bit before 3K, Brooker made a break from Drobeck and charged after Morley.

Meg evened up with Makena right as they passed the finish area at the conclusion of the first loop. By the time that they crested the hill at about 3600 meters, Meg had a gap and wasn't going to be denied. Makena was holding a slight gap over Trish; and, that's pretty much how things ended up at the finish. Meg 1st at 24:15, Makena 2nd at 24:28 and Trish 3rd at 24:46.

They were followed in by Elizabeth Paddock of Missoula (25:23), Nicole Hunt of Butte (26:03), Jenny Newton of Missoula (26:12) and Carly Holman, also of Missoula (26:41)

Meg wasn't even racing a year ago, fighting some chronic hip pain. She sought help for the pain from an orthopedic surgical specialist in Vail late last year; and, chose to have surgery. While the rehabilitation was long and arduous, the results were clearly positive. Meg appears to be on her way back to a national class track athlete (specializing in the past at 5,000 meters).

Not surprisingly, with all 5 of their scoring runners in the top 7, Missoula easily won the Open Team title with 21 points. They were followed by Helena with 76 points and Kalispell with 85 points.

For the master's women, super-mom Nicole Hunt was back on top. Mom to toddler Eon and infant twins Roam and Ember (who were born the week after the 2011 Cup), she held off Missoula's Jenny Newton by just 9 seconds – 26:03 to 26:12. They were followed in by Mary Thane of Missoula (27:06) for the top spots on the podium. And, notably – all three of these masters finished in the top 10 of the overall results.



Throughout the first 3 km loop, Kalispell's Makena Morley led Missoula teammates Megan Brooker and Tricia Drobeck.



Brooker won a Montana Cup title in 2009, but that victory was followed by a hip injury which caused her to sit out the last two Cups.



Brooker regained her Cup title today, with authority, when she surged into the lead at the half-way mark and then powering away before relaxing at the finish with a 13-second victory margin.

On the junior's side – it's no surprise that 2nd place overall would garner Makena Morley the top 19 & under slot. Her 24:28 saw her 2:21 clear of former Glacier High School star Heather Fraley (26:49). The 3rd spot went to Gilia Patterson of Missoula at 27:37.

Billings' Cesar Mireles and Kalispell's Troy Fraley started near the front in what turned into a slow and tactical outing for the first 1500 m. The real contenders in the lead pack seemed happy to wait for a kick finish, while everyone else just seemed happy to be there. It was at that point where Scott Creel, Bozeman's fifty-year-old-force-of-nature, tired of the group's leisurely attitude, and he burst into the lead. Creel's move fractured the pack, and soon thereafter Mireles sling-shot into the lead with Fraley in tow.



An hour after the women's start, the men broke from the line at the blast of the starter's shotgun (this is rural Montana – and, what is more appropriate than a shotgun start????). (BTW – the shotgun start was a nice complement to the regular gunfire coming from the shooting range located just across the road from the 6K point. It was the Plains version of thunder sticks!!!!) A big lead pack was stuck together through the first 1500 meters – including Cesar Mireles of Billings, Troy Fraley of Kalispell, Alan King of Billings, defending champion Chris Kollar of Missoula, Jimmy Grant of Missoula, James Rucker of Kalispell, Scott Creel of Bozeman, and many others.

Over the next kilometer, Mireles and Fraley opened a bit of a gap on the field, with King, Kollar and Graydon Curry of Bozeman giving chase. Into the second lap Mireles and Fraley continued to run side by side – in lockstep all the way until the closing reaches of the race.....where Mireles finally pulled ahead. His 2 second victory (21:11 to

21:13) matched the closest margin victory in Cup history – matching the 1995 (Ted Zderic over Pete Metzmaker) and 1999 (Rowdy Sargeson over Scott Creel) finishes.

Cesar, who is one year removed from his eligibility at Rocky Mountain College, owns a mile PR of 4:08 and competed in several national championship events while at Rocky. He's currently serving as an assistant coach at his alma mater while he finishes his degree program; and, he's giving serious thought to chasing the elusive sub-4:00 mile barrier this coming spring.

Fraley was 3rd overall at last week's AA State XC championships in Helena; and, continues to show that he's one of the toughest, gutsiest runners in the state at any level. Finishing 28 seconds behind Fraley was Rocky Mountain coach Alan King (2011 Muddy Buzzard Runner of the Year) at 21:41. He was followed by defending champion Chris Kollar of Missoula (showing that Ultra Trail runners can keep their speed) in 21:51 and Graydon Curry of Bozeman in 21:59. World Champion Firefighter Andy Drobeck of Missoula was 6th at 22:01; and, James Rucker of Kalispell rounded out the top 7 with his 22:02. In all – the top 11 men all finished within 60 seconds of Mireles. Quite possibly the deepest, most competitive men's Cup ever.

Clearly, his 2nd place finish (like Morley on the women's side) secured Fraley the top 19 & Under honors. Behind him were Adam Wollant (as a potential Grizzly trackster next spring he ran as an unaffiliated runner and wasn't eligible for prizes) in 22:11, Aidan Theard of Butte/Anaconda in 23:00, and Logan Morley of Bigfork/Kalispell in 24:05.

The master's were led by 50-year old Scott Creel (9th overall) of Bozeman in 22:07. The podium was filled by Steve Morley of Bigfork [father of Makena, Logan and Bryn (4th in the 19&under)] in 22:12 and Ray Hunt of Deer Lodge/Butte in 23:07.

For the Master's men's teams – Bozeman led the way with 36 points, besting Missoula (46) and Helena (67). The Overall team title went to Missoula (winning 3 of the 4 team titles today) with 40 points, easily besting Kalispell (63) and Billings (64).



Bozeman's masters men went home with the only team trophy not claimed by Missoula.

The 2013 Montana Cup will be held in the Butte region. And, if history holds true – it's definitely not too early to start your hill and altitude training in preparation for next year. It's now just 370 days away!!! Mark your calendars to be in Butte for that meet on Saturday, 2 November 2013.