

A Day at the Beach

For the third time since 2002, the Montana Cup returned to Bozeman. In that 2002 edition, a combination of heavy mud and hills led to slower times and mixed victories across the state, showcasing the great talent in the different corners of Montana. In the 6 years that followed, Helena won 3 of 4 events one year, and Missoula proceeded to establish a 5-year legacy of winning 3 of the 4 events every year. Could the other towns in Montana challenge their dominance from previous years?

This year's edition saw a record number of registered participants, pushed heavily by Bozeman aiming to place one of their own runners for every other runner from across the state, amounting to almost 42% of the race field. Numbers alone though don't always make up for some the amazing talent that our great state has, and the day's scores reflected heavily by some dominant performances by individuals in their respective races.

The first race of the day, taking place just as the damp and cloudy morning cleared into an almost vacant blue sky, was the women's. Converging into the tight first entrance of the two-loop course was a huge field of gold, but spearheaded by the white jerseys of Kalispell's Cynthia Arnold and Bryn Morley. A lone green jersey in the top group was held by Nicole Hunt, who at this point should really be considered a true legend in Montana running. Not far behind the lead group, a sea of gold was led by a healthy mix of open and junior Bozeman girls. Cross Country is a sport that is defined by teamwork, a concept rare in the adult world of running races. Could the depth of Bozeman fend off the lead Kalispell runners?

After looping through the second time and sprinting across a sandy beach, the answer was no. Kalispell finished first and third, with Arnold's

victory really establishing herself as one of the most versatile and strong runners in all of Montana. Recently finishing second at the abbreviated Rut VK in an international field, it's obvious that there is no incline or terrain that she can't race well on. Nicole Hunt raced exceptionally well to place second, winning the Women's Master's title by over two minutes. Bryn Morley raced into 3rd overall, maintaining a healthy distance from Kenenni Wiegand who helped the Bozeman Hawks to yet again another team title the previous weekend.

With Kalispell's podium dominance, they held off the huge team of Bozeman runners by a mere 8 points (46-54) with the help of Jessica Johnson's 8th place and two other runners in the top 20. Bozeman certainly ran well as a pack, placing their 2-6th runners in 11th through 15th place. Billings also placed well, scoring 75 points to close out the team podium. In the Women's Master's competition, Bozeman's depth prevailed despite Butte's best efforts, placing all 7 runners in the top 10.

Shortly after the women's race, the men started with a massive field of 174 runners. As the gun went off you could practically imagine a herd of bison cruising over the hills, as the thundering of spikes and racing flats fly over the first hill and through the shorter first loop. With a combination of recently graduated college runners, state-winning high school runners from the Hawks, and the amazing overall talent of Montana's open runners, this field was fast and furious and seemed to stretch a mile long from the get go.

From that moment, it was obvious that the team race would be Bozeman's to lose. With 4 of their runners in the top 5, and a slew of those heavy golden basketball jerseys in tow, the race seemed to be a lock for the host team. Sam Read, a grad student and assistant coach at MSU led some of his

own previous athletes as well as the Cats' head xc coach Lyle Weese, who is a many-time Olympic Trials Steeple-Chaser, to an almost perfect score of 18 points. Bozeman's scoring runners were interrupted only by Billings' Cesar Mireles and two of Missoula's talented runners, Morris Wecker and Will Rial. Interestingly, despite the depth and talent of Bozeman's running scene, they have only won 4 Open Men's titles since the inception of Montana Cup, with three of those victories coming at home in the Gallatin County. Apparently we don't like to drive much to earn these victories.

In the men's masters' race, where cup victories have bounced repeatedly back and forth between Bozeman, Helena and Butte, it would prove to be yet another nail biter, just as many of the previous years' scores have been exceptionally close. Helena's Jesse Zentz, a runner truly in class of his own with a versatility of racing the mile to the marathon and any terrain with victories all year, led the master's race with an overall 12th place. He finished the race a bit over a minute ahead of the 2nd place Master's, his fellow Helenian David Morris who held off Scott Creel to round out the podium. Despite the victorious intentions of yet another very deep Bozeman team, Helena won the Master's Cup with a 9-point lead, placing all of their scoring runners in the top 10.

The Montana Cup has grown every few years to a new record high of participants, and has proven it to be unquestionably the most competitive open race in the state. It pulls an assortment of runners that may never race each other, each of them generally filling their own calendars with their respective disciplines. It's the one time of the year were we can all cover the same surface, at the same time, and compete and celebrate our efforts as a team. While we as hosts each year try to provide the best course and experience for you, it will be all of you as runners that help keep

this as one of the greatest gems in our state, and I certainly am excited to see how it evolves and grows.

- Dewey Peacock