

## **2017 Montana Cup Recap**

The Montana Cup offers not only “an exploration of Montana’s magnificent open spaces”, but also exposure to our state’s fickle and temperamental weather. While the day before the 2017 Cup was sunny and 70° in Billings, race day morning dawned overcast with temps in the mid 40°s. Turns out that was the nice part of the day; the temperature fell through the morning to the mid 30s by race time, and light rain mixed with a little sleet, snow and wind gave a hypothermic feel to the day’s events.

But Montana Cup participants do not shy away from a little weather. While most Montanans were indoors watching football, determined runners gathered from all over the state to demonstrate true athletic tenacity. With shivery grins, 163 runners thundered off the start line and around a diverse and challenging 5.2 kilometer course.

The 2017 Cup, hosted by the Yellowstone Rim Runners, was held at John H. Dover Memorial Park, which is owned and managed by Yellowstone River Parks Association, an all volunteer organization that promotes parks and trails in the Billings area. The Rim Runners are deeply grateful to YRPA for all their help, especially to YRPA president Darryl Wilson, who worked enthusiastically to prepare the course.

The course wound through a microcosm of eastern Montana landscapes, across open uplands with expansive views of the Yellowstone River, down a substantial hill to wind through wooded river bottoms, below sandstone cliffs, among sage brush, over Five Mile Creek, and finally up a gut busting hill on a former frontier wagon road. The running surfaces included mowed meadow, gravel, dirt, grass and compact limestone trails. While the moisture did not improve traction, the course was not overly treacherous.

Besides stunning scenery, Dover Park also provided a stellar venue for viewing a cross country race; the scores of hardy fans who lined the bluff top were able to view the second half of the race as if they were watching it in a stadium.

In the men's race, Helena swept the open and masters' cups. They had strong finishes from their 3rd, 4th and 5th runners in the open race, and thoroughly dominated in the masters race.

Nico Composto of Missoula, who led Columbia University to an Ivy League cross country title in 2013, improved from 14th at the 2016 Cup to take the individual title. He was followed by Billings' Cesar Mirales who improved on last year's 6th place finish. Jesse Zentz of Helena (and former Billings West and Griz runner) was third overall and the first masters finisher.

The Billings men once again came up short in the team competition, but had there been a junior cup, the Billings juniors would have won it with a perfect score of 15. Their sweep of the first five positions was led by 14 year old Samuel Smith of Richey.

The Billings Women won their 5th Open Montana Cup, led by two time Governor's Cup Marathon champion Mary Owen. Mary improved on a 7th place finish at the 2016 Montana Cup to take first this year. The Billings top 5 finishers ranged in age from 15 (Elena Vandersloot, first among the juniors) to 40 (Sarah Graves, first masters finisher). The Helena women took the masters cup, with an impressive 3, 5, 6, 7, 10 finish. Billings would also have won a women's junior cup by a single point over Helena.

Following Mary Owen were Bozeman's Jamie Brusa, a former University of Illinois runner, and Missoula's Erin Forde, both running their first Montana Cups. Following Sarah in the masters division was Nicole Murray of Butte. It's worth noting that Sarah and Nicole finished first and third overall at the previous Montana Cup in Billings in 2010; that's some impressive perseverance!

The influences of the MSUB and Rocky Mountain College programs on the team and individual results were striking. The Billings women scorers included three former Yellowjackets

coached by Dave Coppock: Mary Owen, Sarah Graves and Sarah Lord. And Sarah Lord now coaches Elena Vandersloot and 7th place junior Synnove Hunnes at Billings Senior High. On the men's side, Rocky alum Cesar Mirales now coaches the Richey-Lambert Fusion, three of whom (Anna Buller, Samuel Smith and Chase Brown) won top seven honors in the Junior division.

The 2017 Cup was held on Sunday due to a timing company scheduling conflict. The switch from Saturday did seem to affect participation, with 163 runners in 2017 compared to 212 at the 2010 Cup in Billings. This is something future race hosts should consider when scheduling the race.

- Brad Coutant