

Mourne Mountain Marathon (Spelga) 2007

Spelga Dam and the 100mph racers

For many years we have been limited to three event centres and have rotated between them, so regular competitors have been able to anticipate the likely venue. This year following negotiations with the Northern Ireland Water Service we were granted permission to use the area below the Spelga dam. It has secure parking and the other facilities necessary for the running of the event plus the enthusiastic support of the Water Works management and staff made the staging of this year's event pretty straightforward. However, life is never a bed of roses and with just days to go before the launch of this year's activity centre we learned that another major sporting event was being organized in the vicinity. The Spelga Hill climb motor trials had obtained permission to close the roads from 9.00AM and were planning to be racing cars at speeds in excess of 100mph past the entrance to our car park and potentially over MMM competitors. Obviously this is not a good combination so negotiations were entered into with the Rathfriland Motor club who turned out to be a very considerate and flexible bunch of guys. They delayed their race times and this ensured that speeding petrol heads didn't become entangled with rucksack wielding minimalists on a mountain pass.

First casualty

The weather continued its recent trend of being nice to the Mourne Mountain Marathon, with a calm mild dawn, though the red in the sky had an ominous look about it. Cars were soon piling into the parking area and the well drilled marshals set about packing them as closely as possible as we did not want any left out on the road. As the car park neared completion the first car left, a competitor driving off to collect his wife who had suffered a leg injury on Butter Mountain and was forced to retire after just a few minutes competition. That was a bummer for them but otherwise the registration went well and the last teams were well on their way before the first of the rally cars came screaming over the brow of the hill.

Day One Courses

The new D class started from the Western end of the Spelga dam and the other three classes crossed the dam, which had been specially opened for the occasion to a start location on the Butter track. The Elites were presented with a route which took them over the fast ground of Butter then across to the knobbly tops of Slieve Bernagh before doubling back on themselves to work their way south west through the rough wilds of the less frequented southern Mournes culminating at a campsite at the head of the scenic Kilfeaghan Road, over 200metres lower than the day's start point. The B class was a variation of this theme but obviously shorter and the C class got to sample a bit of the central Mournes before following a more direct route to the camp site finishing over Rocky mountain with the Elites and B class down through the very rough ground to the finish. The D class is not as navigationally challenging as the other routes but they were not spared the rough grounds of the southern Mournes and must have wondered at times what they had let themselves in for.

Double Scottish LAMM Elite winners

The elite winners of Junes Scottish Lowe Alpine Mountain Marathon were here but they had split to create two teams. Stephen Bottomley was paired with Ian Nixon while Jonathan Aylward had Dave Wilby as his teammate setting the scene for an interesting tussle. Martin Beal and Tim Lainey last year's second placed team had pulled out (crooked was the description passed on to me) but we had the experienced and former top three finishers Billy Reid and Gerry Kingston prepared to take on anybody. Three good mixed teams were also on the start line so things looked interesting in the battle for that title.

As usual the wall of names on the B and C class entry lists presented little indication of likely winners and the non-competitive D class had a good entry for its first year in existence.

Aylward and Wilby lead day one

The Bottemley and Aylward teams were soon setting a fast pace and virtually matching each others times as they sliced through the hills but the expert navigators of Reid and Kingston were not far behind. These three teams all chose the same routes as far as marker six then Bottomley and Nixon opted for the Windy gap path rather than going over the top like most of the other teams. They estimated that they lost five minutes with this choice and this was to prove the difference between the lead teams at the overnight camp. Billy Reid and Gerry Kingston were less than ten minutes down on the leaders setting things up nicely for day twos racing. Mixed teams held the next three positions, with only 20 minutes separating them. In fourth place Paul Mahon and Roisin McDonnell had a fifteen-minute advantage over Karen Davidson and Jon Morgan with Andrew Mc Carthy and Moire O Sullivan close behind. Unusually there were no veteran teams.

Burke and O Donnell's slender lead.

Donal Burke and Richard O Donnell led the B class home with a slender three-minute lead over Matthew Davies and Christopher Beadle. There was a more manageable 20 minute gap to Charles Sanders and Alan Buckingham in third place then positions became congested leaving the door open to a number of teams to move up through the ranks with a good second day performance. Unlike the Elite class there was plenty of variation in the routes chosen with all the lead teams getting some good leg times balanced against some less successful choices. The ladies teams were having a real battle with Rachel Majumdar and Laura Daniel holding only a few minutes advantage over Sally Ward and Beccy Cash. The top mixed team was Rachael and David Lawrance fifteen minutes adrift of Sally and Beccy but also fifteen clear of the next mixed team of Fredelina Yong and Ben Brittain-Dodd. Gavin Thomas and Jonathan Broxap were the leading vet team in sixth place overall.

Young guns in C class.

Last year there was a dearth of young teams at the top of the C class leader board, but that was not the case this year as Colm Hill and Niall Ewen were setting the pace

sixteen minutes separating them from the third placed hot shots of Gerard Higgins and Ruairi Short. Sandwiched between them were the not so junior Matthew Lawson and Andy Creber, but their bags of experience was invaluable in getting them into a threatening position. Just a minute behind third place was the ladies team of Kirsty Bryan-Jones and Deirdre Ni Challanain ready to sort out the lads if they made any mistakes on day two. Lead mixed team in tenth place were Elise Riley and Stuart White and the top vets were also a mixed team, Lorna Masterton and Tommy Greig in fifteenth place overall.

Extra team butts in!

Although the D class is a non competitive class as far as prizes go, humans cannot help themselves so a brief mention of the leaders who were in fact the mixed vet team of Nigel and Diane Walker. I should mention the activities of two last minute competitors who under normal conditions would have been butted out of the competition for non-payment of entry fee, missing the start and failure to carry the correct kit. In fact all they appeared to carry was a pungent smell for they were in fact a pair of wild goats. The story as it was told to me was that somebody fed them some food and that's what started them running. Mark Nolan explained that as they ran the goats kept appearing behind them announcing their presence with a "baah- baah" Walls, fences, and crags seemed to be no problem for them. I came across them at the gate beside the last marker where they cleverly sneaked through behind other competitors then ran down to the river, looked at the water then decided to keep their trotters dry and crossed the bridge to the campsite to a succulent meal of grass from the fields verges. Mark estimated that they had travelled 15 km.

Kilfeaghan Lane Campsite

The overnight camp was at the head of the Kilfeaghan lane in a field owned by farmer Gerald Murphy, a nice location but in a valley surrounded by rough overgrown slopes, which ensured a leg sapping finish to the days running. Car parking was an issue and so we are glad that no visitors arrived to foul up the narrow approach road. The field had a slope but most teams found a comfortable pitch and as the owner had mowed it there was ample springy grass under their tents to aid a good night's sleep. Our bridge builder Frank had decided after the success of last year's massive construction that something special was required, hence the fine structure across the Watergap river. Unfortunately there was very little water in the river, which took away from the its impressiveness, but non-the-less top marks to Frank for another fine feat of civil engineering. The goats certainly appreciated it.

Blackberries (Mourne Style)

The campsite was soon humming to the sound of chat and hissing cookers and a mellow mood existed as the warm autumn afternoon encouraged folk to seek out old acquaintances and make new ones. I came across the leading Elite teams collecting blackberries from the hedge rows to supplement their rations while other less competitive teams seemed to have everything in their rucksacks and were preparing great feasts washed down with wine or beer. Talk of the weather centred on a bad

forecast for the night and the following day so it was with these thoughts in mind that the teams drifted off into the land of nod.

Elite order changes

There was no rain during the night and the morning dawned grey with cloud on the hills but it was warm and so quite pleasant for preparing for the days running. The goats must have had a particularly good night for they had decided to upgrade to the Elite class. So when Frank blew his whistle at eight o'clock 12 teams rushed off headed by two goats. The leading Elite teams were soon setting a pace, which nobody else could live with and it was nip and tuck as they picked up a series of markers on the slopes of Slievefadda. Northwards then to Slievemeel before the long leg to the entrance to the cluster on the south of the Pigeon range. This long leg saw a change in the running order as the second placed team of Nixon and Bottomley began to establish a day two lead and entered the cluster one minute ahead (overall). The goats had dropped out by this stage and were probably on some crag pondering the strange behaviour of humans and what it all means.

The Cluster

This year's cluster consisted of four points, two on the slopes of Slieve Muck and two at Slieve Moughanmore. There were basically two ways of dealing with them, either bag the two markers on Slieve Muck followed by Moughanmore or visa versa. More accurately: marker sequence (230, 217, 228, and 227), or (228, 227, 230, and 217). A study of the route choices of the leading few Elite and B Class teams indicates that the best route by a slender margin was Slieve Muck first, followed by Moughanmore. I think the main reason for this was that it avoided the slog through the boggy ground around the Spelga Reservoir on the approach to the cluster exit on Cock Mountain.

Nixon and Bottomley bust cluster and win Elite

(Now, pay attention –Ed) The fastest team through the cluster was Ian Nixon and Stephen Bottomley although they took the slightly slower route as did the second and third fastest day two Elite teams but interestingly the second fastest team through the cluster using the better route was the B class team of Nick Barrable and Ady Whitwam with a very good cluster time of 1hr 44min. Elite overnight leaders Jonathan Aylward and Dave Wilby were third fastest through the cluster but lost more time to Nixon and Bottomley and exited the cluster over ten minutes behind them, a position they could not recover from which meant that Ian Nixon and Stephen Bottomley ran down off Cock Mountain, now in teaming rain, to punch the final control and win this year's Mourne Mountain Marathon. Jonathan and Dave secured second place, an hour ahead of Billy Reid and Gerry Kingston both of whom had been blighted with nausea throughout the day.

Mixed teams Special.

A great battle had developed for the mixed title as Karen Davidson and Jon Morgan produced a storming day two run to cut away Paul Mahon and Roisin Mc Donnell's fifteen-minute overnight lead and eventually won by nine minutes. Andrew Mc

Carthy and Moire O Sullivan didn't have such a good day two but retained sixth position comfortably, ensuring that three mixed teams were in the top six.

Burke and O Donnell win B class

Burke and O Donnell set the pace for the B course as they had done on day one but they were out foxed in the cluster by Nick Barrable and Ady Whitwam who entered it over three minutes behind but exited with a ten minute lead which they extended to eleven minutes by the finish line. This performance moved them up the leader board to second overall just five minutes behind Burke and O Donnell's B class winning time. Third place went to Matthew Davies and Christopher Beadle comfortably ahead of Toby Cushion and Simon Pearce who had only a minute's advantage over the fast finishing veterans team of Gavin Thomas and Jonathan Broxap. The ladies title went to Rachel Majumdar and Laura Daniel after another titanic struggle with Sally Ward and Beccy Cash and the mixed title went to Rachel and David Lawrance despite a strong day two challenge from Fredelina Yong and Ben Brittain-Dodd.

Young guns Hill and Ewen claim C Class

The young Turks didn't have it all their own way as the experience of Andy Creber and Matthew Lawson saw them produce the fastest day two time but it was not enough to dislodge Colm Hill and Niall Ewen from their overnight lead so they are this year's C class winners. There were no changes of position for the first five teams so Gerard Higgins and Ruairi Short were third and the all ladies team of Kirsty Bryan-Jones and Deirdre Ni Challanain came forth. There was quite a group of teams all in with a chance of the mixed title but eventually the overnight leaders Elsie Riley and Stuart White claimed it. Not far behind them Lorna Masterton and Tommy Greig were the first vets home and mixed vets at that. Best reaction at the prize giving went to Mary White and Margaret Huyton, absolutely thrilled to win the female vet prize and finishing a very creditable 21st overall.

D Class a success.

Nigel and Diane Walker won the D class by a mile so congratulations to them. There was no prize however as this is a non-competitive class. Instead we put all the team numbers into a hat (polystyrene cup actually) and drew for a couple of good prizes which our sponsors Lowe and Jackson's Sports had provided. I hope the recipients were pleased with them but I think we will have to come up with a more efficient draw system next year. The feedback I have been hearing regarding the D class has been positive, it seems to be fulfilling the role of introducing beginners to the MMM and providing a fall back position for those not as fit or as young as they used to be.

Black Mark.

One area of concern for us has been the allegations of cheating, particularly on the B course. We would love to have loads of secret marshals available to prevent cheating but as anybody who organizes mountain races knows, it can be very difficult to recruit them. Every year our resources are stretched and we pretty much milk the good will of our volunteers dry and by the Sunday we just didn't have anybody available. We

have already had some discussions on the subject and have a few ideas for next year but the bottom line is that the rules are clear; both team members must visit and carry all their equipment to each control. Failure to do so pisses off those playing by the rules, leaving a bad taste which reflects on the event and all the hard work we volunteers have put into organizing the whole show for your enjoyment, so if you are reading this and have caused some of this upset, I request that you desist from cheating in future for the good of the sport. As I mentioned we have some ideas and will apply them next year.

Generally the feedback has been positive and the courses were well received. We hope your memories will be of friendships, sportsmanship from the majority, fine hills, goats and avoiding rally cars. See you next year when the venue will be?!!

Jim Brown 22/09/2007