

The tragic death in May of the helmsman of this event, Denis Rankin, was a blow, which had us reeling for a while until we decided that we would do our best to carry on his legacy and try to produce an event to the high standards he always set. For over thirty years he was the driving force which ensured that this event in a small range of interesting granite mountains in the Northern Ireland ranked as one of the country's leading Mountain Marathons, attracting the top practitioners of the sport and a mass of outdoor enthusiasts from Ireland, the UK and Europe, all keen to challenge themselves in beautiful surroundings.

Denis and the Planning.

Perhaps it is very fitting that on the day he died, Denis and I had travelled to the Silent Valley to meet up with the manager there to see if we could convince him to allow us to use the parkland as our overnight campsite. It was a very successful meeting and was followed by a trip to the Tollymore National Outdoor Centre, where we tied up a few loose ends which effectively meant we had sorted out our event centre and overnight venues. Sadly, Denis died a few hours later while taking part in the Slieve Moughanmore fell race, but he certainly had contributed an important part in ensuring the success of this year's event. Later his daughter Kerry stepped forward to join the committee to take on some of the important roles of her father.

Tollymore and the Coaches

As the weekend approached it became clear that we were to enjoy favourable weather conditions, dry and warm although it was a bit rougher for those volunteers putting out the markers on Thursday and Friday. The Tollymore outdoor centre once again proved to be an excellent location from which to stage the event and their staff were fantastic in helping us with bussing and other tasks. This year for the first time ever we used coaches to ferry all the competitors to the start area which was the car park at Leitrim Lodge in the west of the Mournes. This gave our course planner Terry McQueen much more scope with the courses and brought the wilder, less travelled areas of the Mournes into play.

Shooting star burn up.

The fastest team in the Elite for the first half of the day were Jonathan McCloy and Patrick Higgins, but as has been the case in previous years they were too fast and this year it was Jonathans turn to blow up. If this relatively young team can get their pacing sorted out they could be future winners but for this year the battle for the titles would be between much more experienced operatives. The two top local teams were many times winner Deon McNeilly partnered with Ian Bailey who has been enjoying plenty of success this year, and Billy Reid and Gerry Kingston were once again after the title which they would love to win outright, having been thwarted on so many occasions by team Deon. The main cross the water challengers were Gary Tompsett on his fourth visit to the Mournes, the last in 2005 yielding a second place and his partner Gavin Miles on his first visit. There was also the prospect of a very interesting sub plot in the form of the battle of the Mixed Vets teams with recent Bob Grahame rounder Dale Mathers teamed up with his wife Denise, taking on the navigational skill of Greg McCann and Violet Linton. Also in the Mix were Lawrence Jones, a regular MMM visitor and Helen Skelton from England.

Wild card and the Cluster

Course planner Terry McQueen introduced another interesting feature into this year's Mix, a wildcard point which teams could fit in at any point during their day. As it turned out it did not work as well as he had hoped with all the teams going to it early on in the day but I think a bit of refining will make it work better in future events. A small cluster was also included and here he had more success with teams split fairly evenly in their choice of how to deal with it. All the leading teams had periods of the course when they were the best and this is reflected in the overnight results with only minutes separating them. In relation to the cluster it would appear that the fastest route was the one chosen by Deon and Ian and also by Jonathan and Patrick, which was point 126 first, the track end below the quarry then across to the crag foot at point 138. It should be emphasised that there were only minutes in it.

Closely packed at the camp site.

At the campsite Deon and Ian were fastest on the day, with Billy and Gerry just four minutes adrift. To add to the pressure Gary and Gavin were just another two minutes slower meaning that just six minutes separated the top three teams after five and a half hours running. Paul Mahon and Adrian Hennessy were comfortably placed in fourth position ahead of Jonathan McCloy and Patrick Higgins, struggling to the camp site with Jonathan now just a burnt out cinder compared to the shooting star which had brightened up the earlier part of the day. Greg McCann and Violet Linton won stage one of the battle of the Mixed teams, navigating to a twenty six minute advantage over Dale and Denise Mathers, with Helen Skelton and Lawrence Jones two hours adrift.

Lynch and Kendall lead the B Class

The B class leaders at the overnight campsite were Shane Lynch and Jonny Kendall with a fifteen minute cushion between them and Mark Stephens and Colm Moran, with Andrew Sims and Richard Kendall not far behind in third place. The Mixed team of Finbar and Karen McGurran were comfortably placed in fourth place and the top Vet team was Tommy Begley and Alasdair McCallum in seventh place. Top Ladies team was Taryn McCoy and Kathleen Monteverde in eighteenth place overall. The B class cluster was the same as that used by the Elite and once again the choice of routes through it was fairly evenly split. As with the Elite the lead B team chose the track end first (126), then the crag (138) and time wise they were only bettered by the leading Elite team.

Short and O Boyle in command.

Conor Short and Kevin O'Boyle were twenty two minutes ahead of David Hicks and Owen Brady in the C class then it was a full hour before the third placed team of Matt Crawford and Ric Gamble appear on the radar. After that things are much tighter with Keith Adams and Noelle Ryan in fourth place as first Mixed team and a few minutes further back in sixth place we had the first Vet team of Richard Ross and Keith Dalzell. Top Ladies team were Sam McNeilly and Patricia McKibben.

No Muck on the D Class.

The D class leaders were Thomas Hanson and Benjamin Cox ahead of Liam Smyth and Matthew Smyth, and in third place were the Mixed team of Debbie Kendall and David Topley. Leading Ladies were Katie Malcolm and Niamh Wheeler. The C and D classes had wended their way through less heavy ground than the top classes but it was still hard going as it always is in the less travelled western Mourne. The D class did manage to avoid the slog over Slieve Muck, a hardy perennial of Mourne Marathon planners, and then it was the run to the soft grass of the campsite in the Silent Valley.

Beautiful campsite.

The campsite proved to be a gem, mowed grass, thick and soft without a sheep dropping in sight, plenty of room, and all sites on flat ground where the pegs glided into the well drained soil. Additionally for us organizers there was plenty of parking space on tarmac, (no getting bogged down in a mucky field), a good water supply and a building which we could use for running the event, secure in the knowledge that should it rain the electronic equipment would be safe inside. Also the power supply meant that there were no generators humming away till late at night. And where were the midges? The mild conditions ensured that happy if somewhat sore campers could chat away to old and new friends until the darkness came and even then a full moon rose later to illuminate the way for those making night journeys to the Portaloos. All our efforts to secure this campsite proved worthwhile. If Carlsberg could make a campsite.....!!!

Binnian and the Rankin connection.

Following a good night's sleep competitors woke up to a misty sort of morning with some cloud shrouding the hills but the promise was in the air that the sun would eventually burn it off. This indeed proved to be the case. The Elite teams set off at 8.00am and were followed on the quarter hours by the other three categories. Hardly surprising the first obstacle on all courses was the huge bulk of Slieve Binnian and all teams had to climb over it, one way or the other and those in the Elite and B classes had to work out how to cut down their climbing as they had a cluster problem to deal with. Two of the markers on the top of the mountain were at the base of crags and I think nobody but the most fanatical rock climbing historian would have realised the significance of why they were chosen. Our thoughtful planner was saluting the life of Denis Rankin in his own way by guiding you past two rock climbing routes which Denis had put up way back in the Nineteen Seventies.

Big cluster but in two half's.

For the Elites the day largely consisted of one large cluster which could be split into two distinct sections. Firstly there were four markers on Binnian, two high which were the crags already described and two other controls on opposite sides of the mountain. Every team bar one went for the lower spur on the west side of the mountain then climbed to the summit for the two high crags then descended to the lower manned marker near Binnian Lough. The one team that dared to be different was Gary Tompsett and Gavin Miles and it paid off, for when they got to the manned bolder they had a lead on the field of about four and a half minutes. However Deon McNeilly and Ian Bailey were now moving into overdrive and by the next marker had taken the lead again.

What to do about Bernagh?

Now came the next decisive move in the cluster battle. Deon and Ian headed for the manned marker on Slievenagloagh planning to curve around the top end of the Silent Valley to climb for the high marker on Slieve Bernagh. This is the longer route with less height gain and loss and benefits from more running ground. Gary and Gavin went for the more direct method involving a rough steep descent to the base of the Silent Valley then an equally steep rough climb to the Bernagh marker. From there they went to the manned marker then enjoyed a fast run able descent to the exit cluster marker on Lukes Mountain. Only one other team, Paul Mahon and Adrian Hennessy opted to follow them on this route but it paid off for them as they ended up third fastest team on the day. Billy Reid and Gerry Kingston followed the same route as Deon and Ian throughout the day but could not match their pace and gradually dropped further and further back and would ultimately jog through the last few controls knowing that the game was up.

Deon McNeilly and Ian Bailey win the Elite.

As Gavin and Gary raced down towards the Lukes Mountain marker their hearts must have dropped when they saw Deon and Ian reach it just a few minutes ahead of them coming from the Bernagh direction. Although they managed to get within a minute of their rivals they two must have realised that the game was up as Deon and Ian powered through the last few markers to arrive at the Mountain Centre three minutes ahead on the day and to win the Elite title after nine and a quarter hours of fierce competition with just nine minutes to spare over Gary and Gavin who had moved into second place overall. The battle of the Mixed teams would resolve itself with a blistering run from Dale and Denise Mathers which would claw back the twenty six minute lead of their rivals then convert it into a small lead of six and a half minutes but quite enough to ensure that they won the Mixed team prize.

Fast Cluster Busters blitz B class.

The first cluster of the B class, which was the same one used by the Elite category, resolved itself in a much more straightforward fashion as all the lead B teams dealt with it in the same order as the majority of Elite teams. I note with some interest that the time it took for the two top B teams to get through the cluster was only bettered by two Elite teams. The one team who did copy the Elites Gary Tompsett and Gavin Miles benefited by being the third fastest B class cluster busters of the day. They were the 7th placed overnight team of Tommy Begley and Alasdair McCallum. However on the second small cluster they were one of the few teams who deviated away from the popular route and paid with the loss of a few minutes. By the finish line Shane Lynch and Jonny Kendall had retained their overnight lead, though they lost by one second on the day to Mark Stephens and Colm Moran who ended up second overall. Andrew Simms and Richard Kendall produced another third placed run and were rewarded with third position overall and behind them another fourth placed team ensured that the Mixed Vets of Finbar and Karen McGurran finished fourth overall. Tommy Begley and Alasdair McCallum's fine bit of cluster navigation moved them up to fifth position and first Vets team. Tayrn McCoy and Kathleen Monteverde produced a fine Sunday run and were rewarded with the Ladies title.

Short and O'Boyle make short work of C class.

The overnight C class leaders Conor Short and Kevin O'Boyle really flew over the day two course and completed it in less than three hours, nearly an hour faster than their nearest challengers. Behind them David Hicks and Owen Brady had no problem retaining second position overall but they were out run on the day by Maurice Ruddock and Lee Paterson, a performance that lifted them from seventh place to third and first Vet team. Richard Ross and Keith Dalzell, another Vet team were forth and the Mixed Vet title went to Keith Adams and Noelle Ryan in sixth place overall. Nina Coffey and Greg Lennon were the first Mixed team and just behind them Sam McNeilly and Patricia Mc Kibben won the ladies title. Pauline O Hara and Denise O Hagan were the female Vet winners. The C class had a cluster problem to solve on Binnian and it seems to have split the field up nicely although an analysis indicates that there was minimal time difference between the two main choices.

Hanson and Cox win D Class.

The D class saw a few changes at the top end of the field although the leading team of Thomas Hanson and Benjamin Cox won again and were crowned overall D class winners. Behind them the Mixed team of Debbie Kendall and David Topley moved up from third position to second overall but were out run on the day by a storming performance from Jacqueline Wade and Gerard O Sullivan which moved them up from eighth to third. The first female team was Katie Malcolm and Niamh Wheeler and the Mixed Vets were led home by Dick and Sharon Gerrish.

And a big thanks to....

The Tollymore Outdoor centre is a fantastic venue for hosting an event like this and it was strange looking at all the clean freshly laundered people just before the prize giving, quite unlike some of the previous ceremonies held in a tent in a mucky field. So a big thank you to the centre for their excellent facilities and to all the staff who helped us over the weekend. Also a big thank you to NI Water for one of the most comfortable camp sites ever. Once again Deon Jackson of Jackson Sports was on hand to represent his business and Lowe Alpine UK our generous prize sponsors, and he helped out with the prize giving.

Madeline Rankin.

At the prize giving ceremony Madeline Rankin spoke about her late husband's love of this event and thanked the many people who over the years helped Denis with it. I should add that Denis may have run this event for thirty years but he couldn't have done it without her help. Madeline and her daughters did a lot of the donkey work especially in the days when hundreds of letters had to be sent out – Kerry told me that it was like a cottage industry when she was growing up. Madeline received a long and heartfelt round of applause from all present.

The Rankin Round.

Dawson Stelfox stepped forward and announced the setting up of the "*Rankin Round*" a long distance circuit of all of the Mourne 400m peaks in one continuous run, similar to the Bob Grahame round in the English Lake District and like the Bob Grahame, the challenge is to get around the route in less than 24 hours. A web site will be developed and the description of the route refined and we will be launching the Round officially in May next year, one year after the great man's passing.

Till next year.

So that's that, all done and dusted for another year. Many thanks to all the people who came forward to help in any way and to the MMM committee for all their hard work. It has been very sad for us as a team but we hope we have delivered a Mountain Marathon crafted in the same way as Denis would have done it... The Friendly Mountain Marathon. Pass the word.

Jim Brown.

Jim Brown
MMM Chairman

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