



Low Alpine MOURNE MOUNTAIN MARATHON Event Report 2010



In the days preceding this year's event we had been studying weather forecasts, trying to make sense of the conflicting information. Initially the weather was forecast to be good but as the week progressed the reports became more ominous and by Friday evening we knew that, for the first time in many years, heavy rain was on the way. The early starters managed to get away with a bit of sunshine on their bulging rucksacks but the rain soon arrived and was to remain a feature for the rest of the day.

Deon, Eamon, Billy and Gerry again

In the Elite category last year's winners Deon McNeilly & Eamon McCrickard were back to defend their title and the team they beat by just three minutes last year, Billy Reid & Gerry Kingston, were there to try and wrest it from them. Last year's B class winners Mark Alexander & Jim McCormick had moved up to test themselves in the top category, as were the young hot shots of Jonathan McCloy & Patrick Higgins. Once again no Ladies teams in the top category, but there were two strong Mixed teams represented by Brian Linton & Taryn McCoy, and Dale and Denise Mathers.

Greg's back

The B class had a good selection of quality teams. Last year's third placers David Newell & Roy Donaldson were hoping to push for the title, as were the team just behind them last year, Richard Lang & Alan Gilkison. The top young orienteers, Seamus O'Boyle & Colm Hill, were the hot shots of this category and the wily orienteering skills of master navigator Greg McCann were being combined with another skilled practitioner, Violet Linton, to form the top Mixed team.

Big C Class and prizes for the D Class

The C class, bursting at the seams as usual had plenty of talent dreaming of success, and the D class with its mixture of novices and old hands has now proved itself a success story - so much so that instead of being considered just the preserve of non-competitive teams, we have now got around to having some modest prizes for the top finishers. We had also introduced a Family category this year which allows younger competitors to have a go with a parent or guardian.

New Course Planner

The other big change that regular competitors would have noticed this year is the style of the courses, for we had a new course planner - Terry McQueen. Terry is from a mountaineering background rather than the orienteering or fell running backgrounds of our previous two planners. He has a love of maps and is constantly planning trips and expeditions to remote spots, indeed when the going gets tough I always like to see Terry leading the way. He knows his stuff.

Minibus to Ben Crom Dam

We used minibuses to transport the Elite and D course competitors up to the Ben Crom dam. This allowed us more variety for the D course and opened up more of the Mourne for the Elite to explore. The Elite course zig zaged through the central Mourne to the northwest slopes of Slieve Commedagh, then south again via Bearnagh and the Meels to Carn mountain, before a hop over Spelga and a small cluster of controls around Cock and Hen mountains, overlooking the finish campsite. The early pace was set by the hot shots of McCloy / Higgins, who were really flying. McNeilly / McCrickard and Reid / Kingston, carried on from where they left off last year, matching each other for pace on the first half of the course and the team of Alex Morgan and Mark Gray were also going well.

Hot shots chill out

The weather continued to deteriorate and the wind picked up, driving freezing rain (some even reported hail stones) into the runners. Things started to go wrong for the McCloy / Higgins team as Jonathan failed to get the waterproofs on in time and the driving rain began to chill his body. By the time they reached the manned checkpoint at Meelbeg, he was in big trouble, with the early signs of hypothermia. The marshal wrapped him up in sleeping bags and clothing and we dispatched another marshal with more gear to help him down. The hot shots attempt had fizzled out but I have no doubt that they will learn from this and become serious challengers in the future.

Kevin and Cathal in the grove

Other teams were also experiencing difficulties, including last year's winner Deon McNeilly. However he is very experienced and knew to slow down and get warm clothing on and food into the system. They lost time but at least were still in the event. Reid / Kingston gained in this situation and moved into the lead entering the cluster with a seven minute advantage. Another team going very well over the second half of the course was Kevin Murdock and Cathal McGreevy setting a nice pace and hitting all the marks.

The Cluster Chicks, (er ... Hen and Cock that is)

This year's cluster had been designed so that the C class could have a go at it, as well as the Elites and B class. The Elite teams who would end up in the top positions overnight all chose different routes through it. Reid / Kingston chose to climb Cock first then picked up the river mark before climbing Hen and descending to the finish. However they were over ten minutes slower than the revitalized McNeilly / McCrickard team who produced the fastest cluster time of the day by also climbing Cock first but then opted to go for Hen and picked up the river marker on the run into the campsite. Morgan / Gray opted for Hen first then Cock, charged down to the river marker and on to the campsite, the same route as used by Murdock / McGreevy producing a time just three minutes slower than McNeilly / Crickard. After all this the overnight leaders turned out to be current champions McNeilly / McCrickard but only by a slender three minutes from Reid / Kingston. Alex Morgan and Mark Gray were comfortable in third place and within striking distance should the leaders slip up on day two, and in fourth place following their great efforts over the second half of the course were Murdock and McGreevy. The mixed team leaders were Taryn McCoy and Brian Linton.

O'Boyle and Hill blast the B course

The B course took the competitors straight onto the steep slopes of Slieve Binnian and the second marker in the old quarry workings was soon causing problems. This is a tricky area and with the mist swirling around it was soon bamboozling teams. David Newell and Roy Donaldson lost twenty minutes here, a serious setback to their ambitions so early in the event but not so bad as the hour lost by another team (they shall remain nameless). The real fliers in the B class were Seamus O'Boyle and Colm Hill who set a pace which nobody came near to matching. The real bad period of weather also caused problems as it had done in the Elite class. Reports of frozen hands and discomfort were common and a good number of teams failed to make it to the overnight campsite. The cluster was tackled by the same selection of routes as used by the Elite and the team with the best time through was Richard Lang and Alan Gilkinson in fifty nine minutes using the Hen, Cock, river route. This helped establish them in second place at the overnight camp. The overnight leaders were O'Boyle / Hill with nearly thirty minutes to the good, but interestingly their cluster time was quite slow. Despite their bad start to the day Newell / Donaldson had moved through to third, but they were under pressure as the next six teams were within twelve minutes of them. The leading Mixed team was Greg McCann and Violet Linton, twenty minutes ahead of Helen & Stephen Cassidy. Top Vets were David Wilson & Dan Mitchell - in fifth place overall.

Tricky Quarry navigation

The first three points on the C course were the same as those used on the B course so it was not long before quite a number of teams were searching around the quarries for the second marker. It's a tricky area with various tracks and quarries which rapidly become a confusing maze if your navigation is not spot on. The rest of the C course was more straightforward, heading off Binnian, towards the manned check point on Meelbeg col via the Ben Crom dam area, then across Spelga and into the cluster. Many teams reported that the weather on Spelga was as fierce as they had ever seen in the Mourne.

McGrellis and Largey blast the C Course

The C class was dominated by the mixed team of Declan McGrellis and Ciara Largey who set a pace which nobody else could match. They had no trouble with the second marker and their time to it was only bettered by two B Class teams. Unsurprisingly they were the fastest through the cluster using the same route as the top Elite team, that is, Cock, then Hen followed by the river. At the overnight camp they had a comfortable lead of 35 minutes on second placed team of John McAleavey and Craig Lloyd, who in turn were nearly 20 minutes ahead of James & David Somerville. The leading Ladies team was Pauline O'Hara and Denise O'Hagan, well ahead of any challengers and the top Vets team was Michael Dorrity and Michael Forsyth in sixth position overall. Nearly a third of the C class had been forced to retire by the day's end due to the weather and the injuries which MMM courses can inflict on teams.

Minibus start for the D class

The D class were relieved to discover that they had a minibus trip rather than a thirty minute walk to their start position, which was at Ben Crom dam. Their route took them along the side of the reservoir, over Slieve Beg then along the Brandy Pad with a few diversions before heading south to the manned control

beside Meelbeg. From there they headed over the Spelga hills and to the campsite through the cluster zone which no doubt by that stage most were glad not to be involved with.

Maguire and Lavery galloping ahead

As with the C class, one team had a barn storming performance which put them well ahead of the pack and they were Nial Maguire & Patrick Lavery with 40 minutes to spare on the Mixed team of Ken & Margot Barry. In third place was another mixed team of Tony Drennan & Gillian Black and the Mixed Vets of Dick & Sharon Gerrish were in fourth. The leading Ladies were Christine Kelly & Chloe Hamilton in 20th position.

Hen Track Campsite

This year's overnight campsite was a field at the bottom of the Hen Track and we are very grateful to local farmer John Savage for allowing us to use it. The field itself was well drained which considering the conditions was a godsend, though we did struggle at times to get vehicles into and out of it. The damp conditions certainly curtailed the communal atmosphere we have enjoyed for many years as teams hid in their tents and tried to get warmed up and dried out.

Wet Weather Courses

Sunday morning dawned with low cloud on the hills and rain. In the marshals' tent we were having weather forecasts for breakfast, trying to digest various sets of data some of which was at odds with others. In the end we decided to go with the worst case scenario which was basically, - rain and rain and then to get worse!! We also took into account the effect of yesterday's wet conditions on team morale and decided to shorten all courses. This meant that the Cluster-Bomb, planted at the beginning of the Elite and B courses was defused as teams followed a route straight through, then proceeded to, *mess around on Muck*, before splitting; with the Elites having to take on Binnian, and the B class going more directly to the finish. The C and D classes had two points taken of their routes, *big chunks of "Muck"* in fact. The D courses visit to Lough Shannagh was cancelled.

C Class Timed Starts

The Elites were quickly off the mark at eight o'clock, followed by the B class at a quarter past. We tried a new start system for the C class with teams starting from 8.20am onwards at twenty second intervals. Initial confusion soon gave way to a successful start which saw the massed ranks of the C class split and more evenly spread over the hillside. Finally the D class got underway at a 9.45am. Dismantling of the overnight campsite followed, packing everything into vans and cars, then off to the finish line to get set up knowing that, on shortened courses, teams were bearing down on us much more quickly than usual.

Stolen Marker

Soon we received news that a marker was missing on the Elite and B courses. It was on the southern shoulder of Pigeon Rock Mountain beside a small pond and there was no trace of it, leading to the sad conclusion that it had probably been stolen. Teams lost quite a bit of time looking for it so it was decided to void the legs before and after it - the only practical solution given the circumstances. If we had not been running wet weather courses then this marker would have been part of the cluster and its loss in those circumstances would have totally messed up the courses. As our planner commented later, "We got lucky"!

Deon and Eamon champions again

This meant the courses were even shorter time wise, but at least everybody was competing on equal terms. The leading Elite teams were running neck and neck on the day and arrived at the third marker from home on Slieve Binnian together. Their route to the finish was the reverse of the route out used on day one by the B and C courses, and Billy Reid & Gerry Kingston had already realised that their last chance of winning the event lay in out navigating McNeilly & McCrickard to the tricky quarry marker - the one which had caused so many problems on day one. They observed what route their rivals were using, then deliberately went by the other option hoping that their navigation would be spot on and that McNeilly & McCrickard would slip up. When both teams arrived at the control together, Reid and Kingston knew that the game was up. Bar injury there was now no way of overhauling their rivals' three minute overnight lead, so they jogged to the finish as McNeilly & McCrickard raced to victory for the second year running. Alex Morgan & Mark Gray came third on the day and comfortably claimed third place overall. Cathal McGreevy & Kevin Murdock had no trouble holding on to fourth place overall, though they were forced into fifth position on the day by a spirited run from Mark Alexander & Jim McCormick. Tyran McCoy & Brian Linton won the Mixed team prize.

Close fought battle for the B Class

The B which looked like a stroll in the hills for runaway overnight leaders Seamus O'Boyle & Colm Hill had its whole dynamic changed when they arrived back at the overnight campsite looking for a lift back to base. Injury had put paid to their challenge. This opened up the whole B class as there were a raft of teams within striking distance of first place. Fastest on the day was Mark Hudson & Ivan Park, an effort that would move them up to third overall but the winners were the overnight third placed team of David Newell & Roy Donaldson. Roy reckoned they won it on their choice of route from the gorge marker near Lough Shannagh to the marker on the Batts road. They opted to climb to the Batts road by the shortest route possible then leg it on fast runnable track the whole way to the control while other teams struggled on the rougher alternative route. Second place went to Richard Lang & Alan Gilkison, just twelve minutes slower on the day but in this tight competition; that lost them the title. Richard Campbell & Mark Hanna held onto their fourth place and the top Vets team was Dave Wilson & Dan Mitchell in sixth place overall. Violet Linton & Greg McCann had another good day in the hills to come home as top Mixed team.

Largey and Mc Grellis cruise to victory

The top team may have pulled out in the B class, but no such problems for the C class's top team of Declan McGrellis & Ciara Largey who cruised to victory with a winning margin of three quarters of an hour. John McAleavey & Craig Lloyd comfortably held onto their second place but further down the field all sorts of changes were going on. Overnight third placers James & David Somerville had a very poor second day (maybe injury) which dropped them right down the field but maybe this was highlighted by the fact that so many teams were packed so tightly together time wise, that small changes in performance were magnified. How else could you account for the second mixed team of Timothy Brownlie & Susan McCartney coming seventh on both days yet finishing in fourth position overall, while Edmond O'Hagan & Andy Ruck were tenth on both days yet their overall position was twelfth! Conor Stewart & Alan Kennedy had no such mathematical anomalies with their fine second place run on day two which moved them into third place

overall, and Robert Ingram & Jim Smiley also blasted through to become the Veteran winners. Pauline O'Hara & Denise O'Hagan comfortably won the Ladies title. Special mention also for Mixed Vet winners Tom Greg & Lorna Masterson in eighth place overall and the Ladies Vet team of Sue Hands & Veronica Crawford who ran well.

Maguire and Lavery win D Class

The D class overnight leaders and second placed swapped places for the fastest team on day two but the overall positions remained the same with Neil Maguire & Patrick Lavery claiming first place ahead of the Mixed team of Ken & Margot Barry. Third place went to the Mixed Vet team of Dick & Sharon Gerrish. Of the top ten teams, six were mixed, making the D class the most competitive for this class of runners. Top Vet males were Joe McClure & Wilson McAlister in sixth overall and the top Ladies team was Christine Kelly & Chloe Hamilton.

Prize giving

The weather never got as bad as the worst case scenario of the morning; in fact it turned out to be a good day for mountain marathoning. I didn't hear too many complaints about the shortened courses and it seems that most were happy to have it relatively easy after the battering of the previous day. The weather had its final say though, forcing everybody into the marquee with a dose of rain as Denis Rankin and our main sponsor Deon Jackson presented the prizes. A big thank you to all those who give their time to help out over the weekend, especially the marshals who had to endure some very trying times during the worst of Saturday's weather. Also a big thanks to the water service for once again allowing us to use this fantastic venue and to all their staff for the help they provided.

Plastic Cape Man

One final thought – I think it was a good idea to ditch the plastic cape (see photo of bloke at day one start). I saw him at the overnight campsite in a flash new jacket which he had bought of Deon Jackson at the last moment. Probably his best decision of the weekend.

Jim Brown

September 2010