

Lynch, Bailey, Short, Diver, McKee, Graham & fancy dress excel in the Annual Cracker

Nearly 1,300 runners started the 34th Christmas Cracker on Saturday 30 December in Castlewellan, the event which requires runners to compete in pairs, to tackle an arduous multi-terrain course of road, muddy fields and forest paths while remaining together and a record 647 teams crossed the finish line.

Course

Unlike the course, the weather was fortunately kind on the day, although there was a strong breeze it remained dry with the sun threatening to shine throughout the event. Overnight, however, snow fell on the higher parts of the course creating an additional challenge for both the competitors and course planners, who had to remark the snow-covered sections. A big up-front thank you must go to Jerome McCrickard and Audey McVeigh, course designers who carried out a massive amount of work including liaison with farmers and the forestry commission – it may have taken some almost three hours to complete the course but 100s of hours went into planning, checking, clearing and marking.

Fancy Dress

At the sharp end, the standard of competition was high but it was further down the field the true spectacle took place with the fancy dress participants making up the majority, something which event founder, Ballydrain's Jim Hayes could not have imagined at the inaugural event in Comber 1984. When the event was moved to Castlewellan in 2004, it was Marty McVeigh's idea to introduce Fancy Dress and even he couldn't believe how many would eventually take up the challenge, with many placing more emphasis on costume design than training for the event.



Less than a mile in - Circular Road; fancy dress everywhere (photo courtesy of Siobhan Purnell)

From the start Seamus Lynch and Iain Bailey took charge, winning in an impressive 57 minutes, one and half minutes clear of Zak Hanna and Aaron McGrady, with Irish International Mountain Runners Ian Conroy and Killian Mooney completing the first three teams.



Early stages – Bailey & Lynch lead with McGrady, Hanna, Mooney & Conroy tucked in

The tarmac queen and the mountain goat, Laura Graham and William McKee combined to win the mixed team for the second time in an excellent 12th place overall in 65:07 – Graham said afterwards that she had missed the mud and the hills and was looking forward already to making it three in a row in 2018 – McKee looked on surprised...

Beechmount Harriers' Gerrie Short and Catherine Diver led the ladies home in 71:12 in 34th overall and came home looking a bit shell-shocked but nonetheless no worse for the wear.



Winning Women - Beechmount Harriers' Gerrie Short & Catherine Diver & Winning Men's Mud

Festive Fun

Experienced mountain rescue leader Ian McCracken, normally to be found atop a mountain summit during the Hill & Dale Series partnered with City of Lisburn's Sean McGurnaghan to enjoy the mud while his mountain top partner Mark Hanna marshalled on top of the ski-slope above the back end of the lake. Disaster struck before they even left the registration hall. Having picked up the 'A' & 'B' numbers McCracken promptly lost them – missing in action – the numbers had just simply walked off – he quickly blamed partner McGurnaghan. The numbers were like gold dust and so it looked like their race was run before they even got out of the hall... he has never lost a casualty on the mountain and just as it looked like they would depart numberless, the numbers turned up – on the stage all the time, waiting for the performance to unfold...quickly pinning them on, they departed the scene saying 'not a word to anybody about this'...

All the way through the field of 646 teams everyone battled to complete the course but a few, not following the main event rule of staying with your partner to the finish had to be held by Audey and the Prophet in a corral clearly inspired the by the Equestrian Centre which formed part of the route. It was somewhat ironic that the Equestrian Centre owner Wonderwall was one of the first to held to wait for his partner Paul Byrne – when he duly arrived he was reluctantly released only to gallop off on his own again – wiser eating grass.

At the finish line Queen Scanner Debbie K and her apprentice David O'F had a lot of fun over a 2-hour period scanning bar codes that typically were mud covered and not all were positioned in the most easily accessible place – to be a scanner is to learn to expect the unexpected...

Thanks again goes to all that helped make a great day following months of planning, marshals who stood for hours in the cold to keep all on course, bike riders from Shimna Wheelers who led the way, Castlewellan GAA for use of their hall, caterers for providing the food and all those involved with producing the results which all the challenges presented on the day.

A £1,000 donation will be made to Autism Initiatives, which provides support and services for adults and children with Autism throughout Northern Ireland.

Wingman & Bogboy

A Selection of Fancy Dress



Michelle & Arlene (still best of friends at the finish – bag of wood pellets behind Michelle's back)



The Grinch with the Queen Scanner



Two Pairs of Christmas Turkeys...



Unicorns & Star Wars



1st Where's Wally's Home – Ballydrain Harriers



Whoopie Cushion & Christmas Shopping Bags...