

McKee is First Past the Post on Polling Day!

An un-politically correct commentary on Hill & Dale Race 9 by Bogusboy

Loughshannagh is undoubtedly the most challenging of the Hill and Dale courses, characterised by steep climbs and sharp rough descents. Whichever way it tackled, it presents a very good test of mountain running ability. This year, the challenge was even more daunting due to the heavy rains that had left the going 'soft'. Additionally, the arrival of ominously dark clouds and a torrential downpour at just after 6:30pm threatened to turn the event into something akin to the 2007 race when Paddy Mallon and Pauline O'Hare were unlikely winners due to their ability to take a bearing and read a map while those around them were galloping around in every direction like headless chickens. However, and fortuitously, the dark clouds passed, the rain ceased and the sun appeared, leaving racing conditions more favourable than many had anticipated. This allowed Graham McAuley to launch the drone to ensure there would be a fair fight with no biting or gouging among the candidates as they vied for political gain by securing a better line on each of the climbs.

She's going nowhere

This week's duumvirate were messers McCrickard and McCann, two fine upstanding citizens who would be more than fit to represent constituents and address the nation should the need ever arise. This potentially dystopic duo were most ably assisted by a highly skilled and talented assembly of spin doctors who ensured that the gazebo was set up in speedy quick time at the Agora and secured to the ground to guard against the potentially hostile conditions. The care that was taken was best evidenced when Jap produced a drill, plugs and screws and 'bolted her down.' King arrived dressed like the proverbial country squire; complete with flowing mac and trilby – much to the amusement of his political bed-fellows McInerney and Wallace. He then produced a table that aroused the interest of local antiques expert Ciaran Og Mussen. After declaring the table to be 'a quare jab', Mussen was considering a bid, but King held his ground in typically unyielding fashion and the table was put back in the Land Rover as the election paraphernalia was removed in the aftermath of the declaration.

Who's the daddy?

While McCrickard was managing the troops and ensuring that the ratio of marshals to competitors was higher than normal, ostensibly leaving McCann to run the show in the tent, it was clear from his many instructions that he was the gubernatorial eminence grise. This was further evidenced by the Mass Rally held in the back of the red van during the heavy rain. Using tea and buns as an incentive, he brainwashed the gullible and had them enthused about standing on a wet mountain for an hour and a half!

They were greeted with a smile!

With conditions improving, the directors stood their ground, refusing to impose a sunset clause regarding kit; a position that all found as a sensible direction for sustainable progress. Equally impressive to the queueing hoards was the registration team. Traditionally staffed by hard faced grumpy intolerant and belligerent middle aged men (notwithstanding the occasions when the temperate and courteous Mary Knight is part of the crew – regrettably on this occasion her services were being utilised elsewhere!), registration was managed by three parachuted-in carpetbaggers. Despite the fact that some racers enjoy the weekly mudslinging and muckraking (this was still on offer, albeit not from the registration team), most were impressed by the smiling benevolent faces rather than the usual big stick diplomacy! Rita, Lauren and Debbie were so good that they have a mandate to return every Thursday to do this work!!! As has been the case since the introduction of barcode scanning, the entry polls proved most reliable and 158 candidates, all hoping to top the poll, headed off in the general direction of Carn – some taking the high road while others took the low road. Thankfully the exit polls were equally reliable and all 158 candidates came home safely and there was no need for a recount. At the rear of the field Ian Taylor was particularly impressed by the commentary proffered the whole way around the three amigos and the Tank.

McKee had already secured enough first preferences

With the title already secured after his 6th win of the 11 race series at Millstone, McKee was on the hunt for NIMRA points as the race was also a NIMRA Championship event. With his seat secure and with a comfortable majority, he could enjoy the race. On a night when results elsewhere would deliver a few bombshells, there was no surprise when, after just over 40

minutes, McKee was the first to emerge from the summit of Ott and begin the short final descent. Around 4 minutes later he was first over the line, recording a landslide (or perhaps more appropriately a mudslide!) victory. Mourne Runners saw their representation in the top 3 rise proportionally as David McKee was second. Timothy Johnston made it a clean sweep for the men in blue and yellow with an excellent third place.

A battle for the remaining seats

A little further back there was a right battle royal developing between McConville, Quinn, Murtagh and Donnelly. Similar to last week, the real scrap was for the minor places as all four were very close at the summit of the final peak. McConville dropped quicker than a Sunderland election declaration to secure the title 'best of the rest', seeing off the unattached Quinn, a man who has yet to align himself to one of the main running parties. Murtagh won the v35 in 6th overall, doing enough on the descents to overhaul then hold off Donnelly. Brennan was first V40 in 8th, while local knowledge proved invaluable for Pete Grant who was a magnificent 9th. Grant claims that being born at the foot of the mountain was the key to his success – most agreed this was an urban myth to gain the populist vote from the undecided! The top 10 was completed by Neil Andrews of East Down who made his first foray into single figure placings and is confident of making more significant inroads at the next count.

No chance of getting lost!

Further back again smart athletes were following seasoned and evergreen H&D campaigner Deon McNeilly as the race approached Doan, believing that the wisdom accrued in a long and illustrious career spanning 3 decades would prove trustworthy and reliable up the mountain. To some extent this was true and McNeilly became a stooge for the mid-packers looking for a good line. Alas, McNeilly led them off course and was forced to concede defeat before the final count was made. Confidence in his leadership diminished, forcing the party faithful to find someone more suitable to lead them. A dirty campaign ensued between a number of rival candidates including Mark Alexander, representing the North East, Shileen O'Kane from Greater Belfast and Dunturk's Mickey Flynn. Flynn would wrest the initiative in the final stages of the campaign while his vanquished rivals would add to their running CV, 'I

beat Deon McNeilly' – something that few in NAC have been able to do over the years!

Wilson impresses as the exit poll gets it right!

In the ladies' race Dromore's Diane Wilson made a very welcome return to the series and was a highly impressive 13th overall convincing style with just over 30 seconds to spare over her nearest rival Esther Dickson (Newry AC) who was a gallant 17th and well ahead of many male athletes. Charlene Haugh (Mourne Runners) completed the podium places and earned the right to wear a big rosette – well done to all and to the other category winners, both male and female dotted throughout the field and emboldened on the results sheet.

No unsuitable candidates

Thankfully the 'McKeag Incident' in the 2015 Binnian race on polling day was not repeated as this candidate decided not to stand. On that occasion, as the youngest candidate of the race, he was almost barred from candidacy on the basis of, lack of experience & youthful good looks. Indeed these issues caused much debate between the returning officers, who spent minutes scouring manifestos, regulations and other superfluous bits of paper (many of which were alleged to be blank) before concluding that his race was on – he ran superbly well on that night!. With no such candidates tendering their intentions, life was a little easier for the regulators. The McKeag name did however appear on the ballot paper as mum Nicky competed and had a fine run. At the other end of the age spectrum were the ever youthful V60+ brigade who again showed many the way up and down and continue to be a great source of inspiration and wisdom, offering stability and common sense to the Hill and Dale electorate. This group contained no fewer than 10 athletes; Dominic 'Mad Dog' McGreevy, Mervyn Donaldson, Peter McGuckin, Mary Mackin, Harry Teggarty, Fred Strickland, Kookie O'Hagan, Michael Morrow, Ricky Cowan and Ian Taylor. All of these athletes typify the spirit of Hill and Dale. There was a further call for Teggarty's birth certificate after one pundit caustically remarked, 'sure you were around before Doan was formed!' Harry has promised to bring proof age next week (more than likely his bus pass!) and many believe that he will be moved up a category.

Post-race analysis

The political cavalcade adjourned to Mary Margarets for some traditional Hilltown gauche caviar hospitality under the watchful eye of the Speaker of the House, the landlady herself! As ever the tea was flowing and a delegation had been sent on an international fact finding mission to procure good quality cake. Diane Wilson was first to be seated at the table and was able to regale tales of another impressive outing. With husband Brian option for an abstentionist stance on the advice of Pol Og MacWhirt, Mrs Wilson was forced to fly solo on this occasion. She was soon joined at the table by a fairly eclectic bunch that included Sharon Dickenson and Thomas Leitch and in time honoured anti-androcratic fashion the women sat and drank tea while the men did all the work. Horrox's dexterity in cutting the hoagies was only surpassed by the loving and care and attention that he had shown while making them. He declared his offering to be 'a selection of finely crafted artisan sandwiches jewelled with ethically sourced fillings.' Such finery was lost on the 'Blaney boys who horsed them down their necks with much gusto! In his post-election address, McCann used the bully pulpit to thank all the party officials who had shown great commitment in running a successful and victorious campaign. He paid particular tribute to the marshals, too many to mention individually, who braved the elements to ensure that all returned safely and a fair result had been declared.

The show moves on

Next week is the penultimate race of the series, the Meels, under the stewardship of PJ McCrickard and Andy McMurray. Registration will be at the Happy Valley from 6:15pm. Athletes are asked to car share where possible and follow the instructions of the parking marshals. The pollsters are predicting a 70% turnout and the question is who will be leader of the party at the end of the day. In the current climate anything is possible.