

Record numbers at Slieve Martin

The third race in the 2017 Hill and Dale series took place in Rostrevor on Thursday 26 April. The weather forecast during the lead up to the race had changed that many times it was anyone's bet what would be in store for the runners that evening. Thankfully Kilbroney missed the predicted showers, the wind had dropped and the sun was out just in time for the race.

Registration went smoothly thanks to Mary, Debbie, Richard and Nadia. They were kept busy, with 277 runners entering the race – a new record for the Slieve Martin race. Runners seem to be a forgetful bunch, as after every race, without fail there will be an item of some sort left behind. Usually it's a jacket or top someone has left hanging on a tree, the last thing on a runner's mind after a challenging run up a mountain! Over the years we have been amused at the items left. Last year a McKibbin misplaced her bum bag and when shown said bum bag which had been found the week before was certain it wasn't hers only to come back a week later realising it was! This year someone managed to leave behind a good pair of inov8 fell shoes. The shoes were passed to this week's race organisers in a box along with the other race equipment and left in their parent's garage for a week. Unfortunately, she was not made aware of these shoes and as anyone who runs up mountains knows if shoes are left sitting they can smell like bog... When she returned to collect the equipment on Thursday morning she was given a right telling off for leaving wet fell shoes sitting as her mother had to clean them and leave them out to dry. Confused as she was certain she had already cleaned her inov8s went out the back and to much amusement found her nice clean inov8s sitting next to a second pair of nice clean inov8s! The shoes were collected this week from lost property. If you dislike cleaning your fell shoes after each race I wouldn't recommend leaving your shoes behind as we can't guarantee all lost property will be returned in such a clean condition!

Just before 7:30 the runners lined up to listen to the usual briefing – this time by Stevie Rice who had to stand on a large rock to make sure he could be seen. Stevie was hurried on by top time-keeper Frank Morgan to ensure the race started at 7:30 sharp. In recent years cut-off times have been introduced to the Hill & Dales for safety reasons. These races are different to many other races in the running calendar as they are held in the evening, and up mountains where conditions can be unpredictable. If runners are out too long it can get dark quite quickly, and these cut off times are there not only for the safety of the runners but also the marshalls at the top of the mountains and dotted along the race route.

Thanks to Frank the race was started promptly at 7:30, with Seamy Lynch and Willy McKee leading from the off. While the weather conditions stayed ideal for running, the same could not be said for the conditions underfoot which were the worst its been for many a year. The muddy, slippery conditions made the climb harder and the already steep descent even more challenging. The conditions seemed to suit Seamy who managed a break to win in a time of 32:45, followed by Willy in 33:02 and Timothy Johnston of Mourne Runners making the final podium in 34:30. After Timothy the runners crossed the line thick and fast with excellent runs from David Hicks (4th overall, 1st V35) who has recently been selected as team captain for the Northern Ireland Mountain Running team at the Inter-Counties in May, Keiron Kelly of Newry AC (5th overall, 1st V45), and Gonzalo Lopez de Miguel from Spain who had never ran a mountain race before finishing in 8th overall and 1st junior. Neil Carty shows no signs of slowing down finishing in the top 10 and 1st V50.

In the ladies' race Newry AC's Esther Dickson finished in a time of 40:04 ahead of Mourne Runners quickly improving Sarah Graham in a time of 42:00. Both ladies have been selected to represent Northern Ireland at the Inter-Counties. Third lady home was Newcastle's Mari Troeng who is not long after winning the Wicklow Way Ultra.

Over the years, some runners have managed to go off course – even though hours are spent that morning marking the route. Nigel McKinney is notorious for making his own route on that way down to this finish. Thankfully this year he managed to stay on course!

Once sweeper John "Butcher" Kelly had arrived, it was off to the Cloughmoor Inn, for refreshments, food and presentations, including the much sought-after H&D Mug spot prizes. The race organisers would like to thank everyone that gave up their time to help make another successful race, in particular the marshal's out on the hill who had to endure cold conditions. Next week's race returns to Slieve Binnian, the only summit finish in the series, all runners are reminded not to forget their numbers and also to bring full body cover.

Report by The Terminator