

## **Bailey & Wilson Reign Supreme in the 72nd Annual Donard Race**

*By Bogboy and Friend*

The Slieve Donard Race is an Annual Classic by any measure. Every year since 1945, locals and many from further afield have descended on Newcastle to race to the summit of Slieve Donard (852 metres or 2,796 feet in old money above sea level) and then plummet back to sea level as quickly as possible. This year there were runners from England, Scotland and the Munster Mountain Racing Association; Limerick, Cork, Tipperary; plus the stalwarts from Castleblaney - in all a record 208 paid their £8 entry fee, toed the start line on the Main Street - no turning back now.

Favourites were Ian Bailey (Newcastle & District AC) who set a record for the course last year (McGrady Financial Services & Kelbourne Property had put up a cash prize for a record run - so alarm bells were ringing when Bailey checked in) and Diane Wilson (Dromore AC), both of whom were looking to make it four wins in a row. Bailey's intent was clear as he started fast and led the big field along the Main Street and into Donard Park. Beside him was 20-year-old Zak Hanna from Dromara (Newcastle & District AC) who in his first year racing in the mountains has made a big impact including a maiden victory in a Hill & Dale Race at Tollymore. Also there was Willie McKee (Mourne AC) who leads the Hill & Dale and NIMRA (Northern Ireland Mountain Racing) series at present who many thought would pose the greatest challenge to Bailey.

Around 15 minutes after the start, eagle-eyed spectators with binoculars could see the lead runners starting to clamber their way up the right hand side of the Black Stairs. The weather was beautiful for watchers-on with the big bright light in the sky making an impressive appearance and making it warm - too warm really for the runners. 37 minutes and 7 seconds after the start Bailey reached the summit (53 seconds faster than last year so the record was on) - a great effort that saw him nearly a minute clear (57 seconds) of Hanna with, surprisingly, McKee a further 34 seconds back in third.

Wilson was dominating the women's race and reached the summit in an excellent 46 minutes and 19 seconds with Lagan Valley's former winner Shileen O'Kane in second place in 48 minutes and 9 seconds. Making up the top three was Newcastle's Mari Troeng summing in 51 minutes and 45 seconds. With a cut-off time of 30 minutes at the ice-house on the way up, one runner out of the 208 fell foul of that - poor Farzan Anjomani missed the deadline and was withdrawn from the race, leaving 207 runners making it to the summit.

As anyone who has ventured up there, there are no certainties in racing in this type of terrain with underfoot conditions best described as treacherous at best. The best descenders are able to go into free-wheel and bounce through the heather and the ruts and spot the holes in the ground and manoeuvre round them well at speed. Bailey is good at this - in fact it is not possible to win this race without being really good at it. Maybe a good time to remember that back in the year 2000, Yorkshire's Ian Holmes won the race coming from behind with descending from the summit to Donard Park in under 13 minutes - yes 13 minutes (equivalent of under 15 minutes

to the Centre) including a descent of the Black Stairs that he had never descended before.

So this year, Bailey was ahead of his record and pushed hard as expected on the descent. He reached the Ice House in around 46 minutes (that's 9 minutes from the summit to there!). He was literally sprinting along the promenade with time running out and reached the finish line in 53 minutes and 40 seconds - 5 seconds inside his record from last year. 'Disappointed with the descent', he said, 'I was nearly a minute up on the record at the summit'. Still 16 minutes and 33 seconds from the summit of Slieve Donard to Newcastle Centre is a very impressive feat. Behind him, McKee had overtaken Hanna and recorded 17 minutes and 51 seconds on the descent to come home second (56 minutes and 29 seconds) - 'I was only 10 seconds faster on the climb than last year - should have been much better than that' he said afterwards. Young Hanna was delighted with his third place (descent in 20 minutes and 15 seconds) and the 'claret' all over his legs illustrated the rough and tumble of the descending game - he's learning the art very quickly.

Newcastle AC had 5 more runners in the top 10 with excellent runs from David Hicks in 4th (60:34), Colm Murtagh in 5th (60:44), Barry McConville in 6th (61:17), Colum Campbell in 9th (62:23) and Paul Carlin in 10th (62:57) - all capable of breaking the hour barrier in the future. Note should also be made of a fine run by 16-year-old Scott McKeag from Ballydrain in 16th overall in 65:20 (45:22 to summit and 19:58 descent) - a name for the future.

Meanwhile, Wilson turned at the summit and got into her favourite part of the race - the rough descent. 20 minutes and 34 seconds later she crossed the line taking nearly 3 minutes off her time of 2015 coming home in 66 minutes and 53 seconds - a fantastic performance, making it 4 victories in a row on Slieve Donard. Wilson is proving age is no barrier and is still improving - last year she became the first Irish person (man or woman) to win the Classic Ben Nevis Race. Her time improvement takes her closer to Ciara Largey's course record from 2012 of 64:56.

Behind her the order remained unchanged with O'Kane coming home in 2nd in 72 minutes and 6 seconds (23:57 descent) and Troeng in 3rd in 75 minutes and 4 seconds (23:19 descent). 207 runners made the summit but unfortunately only 206 made the finish line. Young Luke Taylor of Highland Hill Runners in Inverness was in the top 20 at the summit but disaster struck on the bottom slopes near the Ice House when he tumbled at high speed and knew immediately he was in trouble. Marshals were quickly with him and the Mourne Mountain Rescue called - ironically his father raced by a few minutes later not realising what had happened - he saw the 'crowd' around a fallen runner who had sustained a serious arm injury but didn't realise it was his son. Gordie Taylor crossed the line in 80th place in just over 80 minutes but his elation turned to disappointment when he discovered what had happened. A big thanks to all who supported the rescue - including the Mountain Rescue's Neville Watson, who finished the race (75:01 in 58th) and after lying on the ground he picked himself up and headed back up the mountain along with Paddy McCartan to help his colleagues retrieve young Taylor - thanks to the Mountain Rescue who attended the runner, splinted his arm and brought him safely back to sea level.

A race like this doesn't just happen and Race Director Paul Watson led the volunteer team with a calm demeanour and would like to thank everyone who helped out. This included marshals at the summit (including Jerome the Prophet McCrickard who casually ate his spicy lunch at 1pm, left it late to set off armed with radios, scanners, clickers and emergency water and broke a lot of sweat in making it to the top before the leaders - but then provided a great running commentary from the summit), the Black Stairs, Ice House, in the Forest, in Donard Park and at the very important road crossing exiting the Park. The Mountain Rescue and all first aiders who help to ensure the safety of the runners. The starting crew including 4-times winner Jim Hayes of Ballydrain Harriers, the finish-line crew, the registration and results crew. Then there's the sponsors - Hill Trekker, Rodgers Construction, O'Hare's Lounge, Ireland's Appliance Centre, McGrady Financial Services and Kelbourne Property.

It was a busy summer's day in Newcastle with large crowds (chasing mainly ice cream), the VW Owners' Group taking over Donard Park and the Community Centre all jostling for the green space in Donard Park. Thanks also to the Newcastle Centre and Newry, Mourne & Down Council for their support on the day. The final thought goes out to our finish line scanners who had the tough job of scanning a few hearty souls who had decided to pin their numbers onto the front of their shorts - suffice to say there were a number of near misses - the thought turns the stomach...