

Scott & Dickson fly to victory at Drinnahilly

Damien Brannigan is a legend... that's it, a legend. He may have stepped down as Club Treasurer after decades but he wasn't letting go of his Race Director reins for the traditional final race of the Hill & Dale Series – Drinnahilly. All the races now have a 'director partnership' and Brannigan's trusty partner was none other than Rita Devlin who provides the perfect foil.

Traditionally Brannigan is infamous for his post-it lists detailing the race's battleplan – blow by blow. In the modern era he has replaced it with the carefully crafted email novel which he admits he finds useful as it's more easily stored than post-its for next year's race. Part of the uncertainty in his plan though is whether he will race himself. In fact, in 2017 he was so uncertain that when he did decide to race he actually set off 1 minute behind the field. No such uncertainty this year though as he made that decision early during registration in O'Hare's Classic Wedding Venue – yes, he would be racing as his trusty race director partner Devlin said she would have everything under control.

Drinnahilly is the shortest race of the 10 in the series reaching 3.4 miles (that's 5.5km for the kids) and climbing only around 750 feet (again that's about 230m). It was shortened some decades ago to provide a more timely Series Prizegiving back in the days when pens and papers and abacuses were used to calculate the overall winners – these days Darragh McCrickards 21st century tech skills and Debbie K's scanning skills (by the way, lovely home-made number Mr 596 but for some reason the hand-drawn bar code didn't scan 😊) means that results can be produced and uploaded for public viewing within minutes of the final runner crossing the line. Not only that, but on the final night it also means that the Series results are (almost) automatically produced.

The Race Itself

Mourne Runners' Jonathan Scott dominated proceedings, not for the first time this season, romping to victory in 23:11, 39 seconds ahead of Josh McAtee with BARF's Andrew Tees in 3rd in 24:18. Connaire McVeigh was in for a shock, not the fact that he couldn't quite catch Rory McMullan (7th & 8th in 25:20 & 25:22) rather it was hearing that Joanne Mills on seeing Jonathan Scott appear in the distance shouted "quick, quick Harry & Oggie, your dad's coming..."?!? Hopefully all that is needed to resolve the crisis is a visit to Specsavers.



Johnny Scott leading from early on, illustrating the cliché – 'I could do it with my eyes closed'

Ethan O’Kane in his first ever hill race was the first junior home in 6th place overall (25:16) with his proud dad Donal declaring that it was 21 years to the day that Shileen and he raced over Drinnahilly the day before their wedding – ahhh memories.

Newry AC’s Esther Dickson dominated the women’s race winning in 28:01 with the faster going not suiting Dromore’s Diane Wilson, 2nd in 29:18. First female junior was Rebecca Magee in 32:30. 193 runners in total started the race which is the highest ever for Drinnahilly.

Meanwhile an early sight of Hen Kelly swanning down to the finish line in his marshall’s bib led to questions being asked – were you not meant to be at checkpoint 6? His sharp reply was “that ballb** of a race director always puts me at the furthest point away, so I never made it...” to which a quiet voice from behind him said “hey you, the race director is Damien Brannigan and he’s my dad... who are you?”; “I’m Barry McConville he said...”; oops.

Full praise to the route markers who as the series ended demonstrated that even in route marking, practice improves efficiency – in only one and a half hours on Thursday evening Jerome McCrickard and Francie McAlinden sawdusted the course with every twist and turn marked to perfection with appropriately deposited red and white tape too. A quick check by the ever-diligent McCrickard on Friday evening revealed that “some wee ba***** had removed the markers” – one hour later McCrickard at a speed not seen in him for years had covered the whole course again single-handedly to bring the routemarking back to the required standard.

A good time to thank all the volunteers, not just for Drinnahilly but for the whole series. Oh and an honourable mention again to David Smyth, he of ‘Beechers Brook’ fame from the Luke’s Race, for clearing the briars during the week from the cobbles by the river – no doubt contributing to his solid 9th place performance on the night.

Among the volunteers were a range of ‘sweepers’, those souls who volunteer to accompany the runners at the back of the field to help ensure the safety of indeed the whole field. This week it was Joe McCann who declared, for some reason, that he’d forgotten his strap-on? Ian Taylor perhaps wished he forgotten to turn up, as he tried to work out which was worse – the challenging course or listening to Joe? He did nonetheless comment that he’d enjoyed the chats with the sweepers over the weeks not that he was by any means the backmarker at every race.

Finishing the race where we started with the race director Brannigan himself, coming home in a racing finish in 69th overall in 30:15 – brilliant to see, but closer inspection revealed a mishap. Close to the finish at ‘checkpoint 2,123’ volunteer Phil Murdock had noticed that it was a slippery corner and was warning the runners to take care but several slipped and crashed including the poor race director with pebble dashed elbow, hand and knee – rolling back the years – blood flowing freely down his leg and demonstrating his expertise at self-first-aid.

Overall Series Results

What is great about the Hill & Dale Series is that each race is different and I mean different to each of the other races and not only are there 'bragging rights' for runners in each race but there is the overall series results where runners' best results from 6 races count.

A big thanks to Paparazzi Paul Fegan for his action shots from all of the 10 races but 'nil points' for leaving his camera in the car for the prizgiving – so indoor shots below courtesy of Kerry O'Flaherty.

Women's Categories

First up is Mary Mackin and she is a legend of the series and never short of an opinion or two. Not only did she romp the W65 category (and congrats to her for that) but MC for the prizegiving, Joe McCann had secured a Hill & Dale mug for her from 2014 which would complete Mary's set – and boy was she made up, I think it has made her year – 2022 cannot get any better. Thanks to the Broken Wing Commander for making dreams come true.



Mary Mackin with her age group trophy

Next to the W60 category and a very popular victory for Pat Shields, smiling all the way to the trophy. An honourable mention too to 2nd placed Jacinta Doyle, the popular local PR teacher.



Murlough AC's Pat Shields

Next to the W55 category and winner was Hazel Sutherland also smiling all the way from Ballycastle and that's a long way from the Mourne – congrats to her and to Aine McNeill of Dromore for her 2nd place.



Ballycastle's Hazel Sutherland

In the W50 category (by the way I think there might need to be a birth certificate check introduced for age categories going forward – or on the other hand just accept that running slows down the ageing process) Diane Wilson was the winner (including overall race victories at Luke's and Loughshannagh) from Ballydrain's Amanda Perry.



Dromore AC's Diane Wilson

In the W45 category the winner was Karen Wilton who during the series raced in the Binnian race which she had done the last time the race route had been used 20 years ago. Second in this category was Catherine McIntosh.



Lisburn's Karen Wilton & Cassie

In the W40 category Newry AC's Ciara Coffey won ahead of Dromore's Gail Martin, while the younger mountain talent was led home by Ciara Savage, taking the female junior category with 6 race victories. Honourable mention too to Rebecca Magee who despite studying in Newcastle-upon-Tyne managed to come home and win 4 of the races.



Newry AC's Ciara Coffey



Newcastle AC's Ciara Savage

Men's Categories

First out of the blocks and massive congratulations to John Adgey who won the M75 category. John has been a stalwart of local mountain running scene for decades and great to see him still bringing home the bacon.



M75 winner John Adgey

There were a record 6 finishers in the M70 category where renowned architect Peter McGuckin was the victor ahead of local (kind of) man Ernie Hall.

Using the series as part of his training regime for the world-famous Sierre-Zinal race in Switzerland in August, Dominic McGreevy won the M65 category from John Sinton. The M60 category was secured by Newry AC's Paul Le Blanc from Dromore AC's High Suffern.



Newry AC's Paul LeBlanc

The host club's Chair, Deon McNeilly, struck down by COVID in the final week of the series and unable to make the prizegiving, won the M55 category from Castleblayney's finest Francis Nugent.



Francis with brother Connell Nugent & Anthony Malone - the Castleblayney men exemplifying the Hill & Dale spirit for many, many years

It seems to be the tightest category in recent times and has led not only to tight finishes but the off argument and the sharing of the spoils. This year was no different for the M50 division with 3, yes 3, runners sharing the title – Victoria Park & Connswater AC's Thomas Leitch, Annadale Striders' Thomas McCorry and host club's Pete Grant. Grant also shared the M50 title back in 2019. The organisers may well publish formal criteria for splitting the category places for 2023.



Pete Grant, Thomas McCorry & Thomas Leitch – M50 winners

Enterprise train driver Colum Campbell, representing the host club, won the M45 title ahead of Newry AC's Maurice Harte. In the M40 category Armagh AC's Lorcan Vallely (son of the race founder and director of Flagstaff to Carlingford, Slieve Gullion and another wee race known as the Armagh 5k on the road round the Mall in Armagh) took the title from host club's Gary McEvoy.



Colum Campbell the M50 winner

The M35 category was won by 'unattached' Sean Donnelly, a man with strong ties to Newcastle with BARF's (out of mid-ulster) Jonathan McCloy in 2nd place.

There were 5 male juniors who completed the series, more of the winner later but well done to Ethan McMullan in 2nd, Patrick McDaid in equal 3rd with Yasin Brannigan and Adam Ewart in 5th.

Overall Winners

Congratulations to **Newry AC's Esther Dickson** took the overall women's title for the 4th year in a row (2017, 2018, 2019 & 2022), in a closely fought battle with Dromore AC's Diane Wilson.

She needed the final race to secure the title and she capped the series off in style with a straightforward victory at Drinnahilly to make it 5 wins and one 2nd place in the 10 races in the series – victories at Slieve Martin (Kilbroney), Rocky, Millstone, Meels & Drinnahilly and the 2nd place at Binnian – victories in the final 3 races, all of which she needed.



Esther Dickson's 4th series title in a row

In second place was **Diane Wilson**, who loves the tough descents and would probably say that there aren't enough of them in the Hill & Dales Series but nonetheless she had two victories, the first in Lukes and the second in the toughest race in the Series – Loughshannagh – but plenty of 2nd places to back that up.

In third place **Mourne Runners' Sarah Hanna** returning to racing this season and progressing well with each week. Honourable mention too to BARF's Alice Flint who showed up 3 times and took 3 victories – Castlewellan, Tollymore and Binnian to the Top.



Mourne Runner's Sarah Hanna – 3rd place overall

In the men's section history was made with not only a junior runner taking the Series title for the first time but he is only 17 years old with 2 more seasons as a junior athlete – take a bow **Tom Crudgington**.

Crudgington's series started with victory at Castlewellan, where he came home ahead of Newry AC's Gary Crummy who this weekend ran 14:58 for 5000m at the Irish Track Championships. He was then 2nd to Zak Hanna in race 4 over Binnian, before taking a resounding victory over Rocky in race 5.

Commonwealth steeplechaser Adam Kirk-Smith turned up for Lukes (race 6) and followed Crudgington all the way round before outkicking him to win – another 2nd place for Crudgington.

In race 8, the longest and toughest of the Series, Loughshannagh, he ran almost the perfect race, shadowed over Carn initially by Kirk-Smith, he dropped him on the descent and had a commanding lead at the final summit at Ott. He didn't choose the best line on the final descent but he held on to win from Scott.

Race 9 over the Meels was a repeat of race 8 with Crudgington taking victory again over Scott to secure the title with a race to spare – 8 points for the series victory.



17-year old Tom Crudgington with his Senior and Junior Series Trophies

Johnny Scott took second place overall after starting his series with a victory in Tollymore and another solid victory over Millstone. He took a 2nd place in Loughshannagh and 2nd place in the Meels before a clear victory in the final race at Drinnahilly.

Zak Hanna made a couple of 'cameo' appearances in his 'pre-season' before heading out to race internationally. First up he had a great victory at Slieve Martin (Kilbroney) where he took Seamy Lynch's 7 year-old record by a big margin then victory in Binnian to the Top taking 1:12 off the great Robbie Bryson's 1999 course record.

As the book shuts on another Hill & Dales Series, it is really important to thank everyone who helped across the past 3 months and in putting in the hard yards to prepare for the Series – it is a massive team effort and not only would it be unfair to start to name anyone as there are so many but it is also impossible to list all the roles that need to be filled – a massive thanks to everyone who helped in any way at all. Enjoy summer and stay safe.

BOGBOY – the original and the best 😊