**McAtee and Dickson shine in the early summer sun**

***Hill and Dale Race 7 - Millstone by Bogusboy***

Incredible as it may seem, Thursday 1 June witnessed the 7th race in the Hill and Dale Series - time certainly does fly when you are having fun. This race has experienced some awful weather in recent years which even led to a change of course on race evening due to torrential rains and those mad enough to toe the line waded through postdiluvian conditions to complete the course. Nothing could have been further removed from the conditions experienced on this occasion. The sun was splitting the stones and record numbers had once again registered online in advance for this testing course. Such were the ambient conditions that Race Directors McVeigh and Grant were both caught smiling at the same time, but unfortunately this was not caught on camera. The question was would this last and who would be responsible for bursting the bubble - Butcher Kelly was the bookmakers' favourite and like a fine wine, he did not disappoint when he suggested that the fire break could do with some bush trimming. The response he received from the two growlers cannot be printed!

As always, the fun and games begin at the registration van where numbers are scanned and diatribes of bitter invective are hurled at the suspecting and unsuspecting victims. Seasoned campaigners like Jim Brown and Peter McGuckian have begun to demand a volley of verbals to ensure they get value for money for their race entry - Brown has even asked if he can have Paddy Mallon’s as well!!! Needless to say, there are always a few stalwart NAC members willing to volunteer to oblige. There were also some interesting pre-race warm up routines performed on the grass. Most noticeable among these was that of evergreen John Adgey who, in performing his stretches was buried in the undergrowth, popping up occasionally like a meerkat. It was a scene akin to ‘Last of the Summer Wine’.

As Donard Park filled up, one or two, including Uncle Frank were looking a little bewildered as they ruminated about where registration was taking place. Enter one Dominic McGreevy to bring calm and order to the proceedings by asking the question on everyone’s lips, ‘where do I sign on?’. His curiosity turned to anger within 5 minutes when he found himself outside the Newcastle Job Centre!!! Thankfully, everyone was registered and the Nugent brothers set records at each end of the spectrum as Connell was registered in abundant time while Francis attempted a pincer like movement to slip into the crowds in a veiled attempt to disguise his tardy time-keeping. Needless to say, nothing gets past the eagle eyes of those with the apparent ability to see through van panels. Nugent junior was brought to task, scanned and the race could get underway.

As the 238 athletes disappeared up the tarmac path, attention turned to the next piece of important part of the proceedings - refreshments for the registration team. Many of these hard-working professionals were starving and had either lunched at 11:30am, breakfasted at 3:30pm, or were so busy that they had not eaten since the previous race! The RDs looked at one another until McVeigh caustically admitted that he had been so busy sitting around all day doing nothing that he had completely forgotten this essential duty. Calm was restored when a £20 was produced and Grant and McCann were sent to the shop with requests that included a popular cola brand, well known mixed jelly sweets and Fingers. Grant proved his worth as a canny shopper and maximised the purchases with adroit ingenuity that ensured that McVeigh got very little change while those in the van got a cornucopia of treats.

While this was all taking place, there was the other matter - the race itself. Joshua McAtee proved unbeatable on the night and in very humid conditions led the field home in 37:49, a very impressive time for the Mourne Runners’ man. 40 seconds later, Ashley Crutchley crossed the line in second place to continue his impressive showing in his first year of competition in the series and the podium was complete when Jonathan Scott appeared on the path 39 seconds later. An honourable mention goes to Ethan O’Kane who was fourth home and first Junior finisher in 39:36. Son of Hill and Dale veterans Donal and Shileen, the boy clearly gets his fell running talents from his mother!

In the ladies’ race, it was another reasonably comfortable victory for Newry ACs Esther Dickson who was 27th overall in 44 minutes flat. Martsje Hell was 35 seconds adrift in 33rd overall and the aforementioned fell running genes of Shileen O’Kane enabled her to finish 3rd lady in 55th place overall.

As the season now draws closer to a close, those looking to complete the series and perhaps win a category will be planning the remaining races carefully. There is still all to play for in many of the categories and battles will continue until Drinahilly on Friday 23 June. I almost forgot to give Mary Mackin her weekly mention, so that's now another box ticked!

The Hill & Dale, like so many other events, is only possible due to the commitment of the volunteers who prepare for the race, officiate and marshal throughout and tidy up after. These efforts do not go unnoticed and this week’s RDs want to sincerely thank all who contributed to the smooth operation of the event.

Next week is one of the most iconic races on Hill & Dale calendar, the Loughshannagh Horseshoe with the course going anti-clockwise this year. For clarity for the McVeigh ‘Rocky’ duo, this means Carn first and Ott last. While the weather forecast looks promising for Thursday, the Race Directors are insisting that full body cover must be carried due to the inevitable fact that conditions can change very quickly as evidenced both by Binnian this year and Loughshanagh on many occasions in the past. The safety of our participants is our most important priority. Registration is open online until Tuesday evening and all those registered are reminded of the need to get scanned at the van before the race. Part of the iconic status of this race is the post-event pilgrimage to the Horseshoe Bar, AKA Mary Margaret’s for refreshments. This longstanding tradition is part of the folklore of the race and in the past, there have been 40th birthday celebrations and the selling of chickens and cocks in a venue where the kitchen is usually more packed than the bar and the hospitality is second to none. You can also be guaranteed an insult or two at the presentation and indiscriminate bias in the distribution of mugs, providing Barry Og McConville has not given them all away by the time we get there!!!

See you all at the Ott Car Park on Thursday and remember to follow the instructions of the marshals and not to use the spaces marked off for passing traffic.