

Johnston reigns supreme in the rain and the mist

Loughshannagh Horseshoe by Bogusboy

A wise Prophet once remarked, 'it's the 'oul dog for the hard road and the pup for the pad'. These words were echoing in the ears of the entries management team co-ordinated by logistics Svengali Lorna Cunningham and her apprentice Big Ron Horrox and the course management team headed up by Jerome McCrickard as the clock struck the 6th bell on Thursday 5 August. Both crews had converged at the layby at the foot of Ott Mountain to prepare for the first Hill & Dale event since June 2019, notwithstanding the Slieve Donard Race in September 2020. 138 enthusiasts of the noble art of getting up a mountain (or in this case 4) and returning safely had registered, eagerly awaiting their first foray into the hills with a number pinned to their chest in two years. They also remarked how much they had missed the verbal volley of volatile and bitter invective doled out when collecting their numbers!

Hardy Bucks

Alas, conditions were less than favourable and as the day progressed showed no signs of relenting. As the organisers arrived, the heavens opened and what little of Ott was visible disappeared. However, mountain runners are made of strong stuff and equipped with plenty of waterproof gear, a map a whistle and a compass were unperturbed by the seemingly impossible conditions. Having said that, the question posed by one competitor did little to inspire confidence in those responsible for getting everyone back to the finish when he posed the question, 'where is the start?'"!

I have to be home for 9

Of the 138 registered, 105 turned up to compete. For the others it may have been a case of discretion being the better part of valour. As he munched on his fish supper like Alf Tupper, the Prophet told his fellow organisers that he needed to be back in the house for 9 as he had a very important programme to watch. This led to speculation that he might be going to Spain as a late entry in a different event. As the evening unfolded, it became clear that he would not be meeting his rendezvous with the 'Islanders' and as he pulled out of the car park at just after 10pm he was overheard making an urgent phone call home. The exact words cannot be confirmed, but they went something like, 'are you totally sure you hit record?'

Men with Ven

If a man who owns a van is a man with a van, then surely to men in a similar situation are 'men with ven'!!! In this case the 'ven' could not have been any different. As the papers from the fish suppers were gathered up, the process of setting up the entries commenced in the red transit. Shovels, begs of cement and other building paraphernalia were being moved when McNeilly arrived in a cleaner, better-appointed vehicle and generally more salubrious vehicle. It took little to persuade

Miss World to jump van when she saw the fancy upholstery, electricity, fancy lighting, and as luck would have it tanning cubicle.

And they're off

After the kit check and mandatory safety briefing, Uncle Frank Morgan blew his trusted whistle and the 104 brave souls (one athlete got his number, thought about it, and declared himself scratched) set off into the mist. By this time the marshals were standing at their posts awaiting the runners – special thanks to Paul Fegan, Frank Cunningham, Aidan Brown, Mark Hanna, Liam Smyth and Audey McVeigh who braved the elements of an awful night and made sure that everyone returned safely. Audey was typically ebullient upon his return, commenting how grateful he was for the time spent at one with nature on the top of Carn!

Thanks also to Laurence Hamilton and John 'Butcher' Kelly who acted as sweepers, often rounding up those going astray and keeping people on track to the best of their ability. Next year they are going to bring a few sheep dogs.

The Young Bull and the Younger Bull

At the Business end of the race Timothy Johnston of Mourne and Newcastle's Tom Crudgington locked horns in the early stages. In the end, experience in the mountains and knowledge of the course proved decisive as Johnston moved away after the summit of Loughshannagh and claimed a comfortable win by over 4 minutes. Crudgington, despite his young age, stayed well and came home in second place. On a better night in clear conditions, it might have been closer, but Johnston was good value for his win and secured the NI Championship in the process. Young Tom is certainly one to keep an eye on in the future as he grows in experience and develops under coach McVeigh. Sean Donnelly, a man who loves the challenge of the mountains was a very credible third.

Dickson of Carn Green

In the ladies race it was business as usual for Esther Dickson with a fine run that saw her finish 14th overall with half a minute to spare over lesser spotted Diane Wilson who made a welcome return to racing. My sources tell me that Diane and Brian tossed a coin to see who would run while the other minded the dog. Brian won and made Diane Run. He has been reading the Pol Og MacWhirt Guide to People Management. Debbie McConnell completed the ladies' podium.

All in all, it was an interesting and eventful evening, but thankfully everyone arrived back in one piece, save for the few bumps and bruises sustained along the way; such are the joys of being a mountain runner. For most the greatest disappointment was the fact that we were unable to make the pilgrimage to Mary Margaret's to enjoy some good old fashioned Hilltown hospitality – maybe next year! Next week, it is Millstone, starting and finishing in Donard Park and the 'series' ends with the Slieve Donard Race on Saturday 28 August.