

The Slieve Donard Race 2019

Report by Big Yin

The Slieve Donard Race is an Annual Classic by any measure. Every year since 1945, locals and many from further afield have descended (no pun intended!) on Newcastle to race to the summit of Slieve Donard, the highest point in Northern Ireland (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 the race would also serve as the first race in the Irish Mountain Running Championship.

With the sun out and the snow on the mountain melting, Runners from as far away as Cork had their kit checked, paid their £10 entry fee and toed the start line on the Main Street – no turning back now.

The Route

Starting in Newcastle's Main Street the runners first head for the Ice House and the Glenn River path. Now clear of Donard Forest and onto the open mountain the race is really on with the first checkpoint ahead/time cut off point at the Saddle. From the Saddle the runners begin the tough climb to the summit of Donard and the second checkpoint. From here runners descend down the other side towards the third checkpoint at the quarry, where a good line will see you picking up the path that leads to it. Free route choice (plus an alternative guide route) from the quarry to the fourth and final checkpoint at the first bridge enables both the brave and supreme navigators to possibly make up time through the forest. From the first bridge the marked route leads to the finish in Donard Park.

The runners and race

Favourites were Seamus Lynch (Newcastle & District AC) who won in 2018 and Esther Dickson (Newry AC). Both Seamus and Esther are in good form with recent wins in the Hill and Dale series ... they will be hard to beat.

Past winner and supreme climber Zak Hanna was missing as he prepares for the 1st World Cup race in French Alps. Also missing was the in-form Timothy Johnston and Jonathan Scott from Mourne Runners, Newcastle's Mark Stephens, Shileen O'Kane Lagan Valley and Laura Graham Mourne Runners who were representing Northern Ireland at Inter-counties Mountain Running Championships.

Around 12 minutes after the start, the first reports were radioed in from the ice house "Lynch, Murtagh and Campbell of Newcastle stretching them out with Mullins, J Bell, P Bell, Drozdziok, Fortune and O'Farrell all IMRA in close attendance" Were Newcastle and IMRA running to team orders? The weather was sunny and warm for spectators with the big bright light in the sky making an impressive appearance. The earlier high snow was however now melting, and the going was getting heavy underfoot for the runners.

Lynch reached the summit in 39:10, with Campbell 42:33 closely followed 3 seconds later by Murtagh. Furey, Fleet and O'Farrell all peaked in sub 44 minutes. All solid times with Campbell's second spot the highlight - a great effort from a runner who runs only twice a week, his performance is enhanced from weight sessions and a strong core! Unfortunately for Campbell disaster was to strike on the

descent and a twisted ankle denied him a podium finish - Campbell still made it to the finish for an ice pack and plenty of "if only".

Esther Dickson was dominating the ladies' race and reached the summit in an excellent 46:13 with Mari Troeng in second place in 49:28 closely followed by Sinead Murtagh in 50:28 both of Newcastle AC. To win this race you also have to be able to descend and this is where Esther Dickson really excels and she scythed her way to the finish in a superb 19:29 and the third fastest descent of the day. Gary McEvoy Newcastle AC also had a superb descent of 17:53 bettered only by the race winner.

Lynch emerged into the sunshine in Donard and still had the time to smile for the camera as he crossed the line under the magic one-hour mark (56:50) to take his second Slieve Donard win.

Behind him, Murtagh had recorded 19:59 on the descent to come home second (62:35) Murtagh continues to improve and this superb second place improves on his fourth in 2018. Brian Mullins from IMRA finished third (64:55) recording 20:03 on the descent. The IMRA contingent packed well placing six runners in the top 10.

Meanwhile, leading lady Dickson crossed the line coming home in 65:42 - a fantastic performance aided by the superb descent and she placed 10th overall. Behind her Troeng remained in second coming home in 76:04 (26:36 descent) and Bernadette O'Kane of DUB runners descended well coming home in third 78:55 (24:42 descent).

Through the field there was some great performances with Gary Cairns coming home 42nd place with a "best yet" of 75:48.

Special performances from Ricky Cowan Mourne Runners and Ernest Hall Dromore AC who both beat their age to the top! Ricky at 70.5 years of age reached top of Slieve Donard in 67:32 and Ernest at 67 years made it in 63:40 Tough work for a free but well-earned refreshment.

A lot of helpers needed

A race like this doesn't just happen and Race Directors Paul & Deon would like to thank everyone who helped out. This included marshals at the summit, saddle and ice house. The entry team, the finish-line crew, the registration results crew, photographers and forest & road marshals. A lot of people put in a big shift to make sure that everyone had an enjoyable and safe experience.

Thanks also to the Newcastle Centre, Newry, Mourne & Down Council and PSNI for their assistance on the day. Thursday sees the equilibrium restored with the return of Hill and Dale race "Rocky" on Thursday 16th May. Competitors are reminded of the need to comply with kit regulations and bring the required body cover in the event of poor weather.