

## **The Muddy Buzzard** Musings of the Trials of Miles in Big Sky Country, Saturday, 23 June 2012

**The Wulf Howls Again.** Nice weather, good trail conditions, great competition and amazing race organization – that’s what makes for a great event. All those things and more were to be found at the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Wulfman’s CDT-14K Trail Race. The race takes place on the Continental Divide Trail between Homestake and Pipestone Passes east of Butte, Montana. Named in honor of John “The Wulfman” Wulf, the Godfather of Butte’s *Piss & Moan* Runners, the race is held each year on the Saturday closest to the summer solstice, the anniversary of The Wulfman’s final group run.

Run in opposite directions every other year, this year saw the race in the southbound direction between Homestake and Pipestone. Although not considered a technical trail, the course makes up for it with a combination of climbs and altitude. With a starting elevation of 1900 m the course rises in a series of steps/climbs 400 m (high point around 2300 m) over the first 8.5 kilometers. From there, it’s mostly downhill over the last 5.5 kilometers to a finish elevation of 1935 m (net uphill of 35 m). Those last 5.5 kilometers are deceptively challenging though, with a couple of uphill “bumps” in the last 3 kilometers that really make you work. As a result, finish times and runner comments suggest that this is the more difficult race direction.

Being a single track trail all the way – the race start has to be adjusted to accommodate the 240-person field. Based on predicted times and consideration by the race director (Ray Hunt), the runners are seeded to go out on the course in 10-second intervals. With the faster runner’s going out first, this allows all of the runner’s great access to the trail with limited needs for passing or other potential conflicts.

Race day was mild, dry and sunny. But, the shade of the trees and some well timed breezes kept the conditions reasonably comfortable. The lack of winter snows and spring rains were evident when the couple of notoriously swampy spots were, at worst, a bit damp. That made for probably the best trail conditions in the event’s history – and the result was some great racing.

The men’s race this year was a bit more of a question mark than it had been in the past. Two time defending champion Lynn Reynolds was skipping this year. Also absent were some top runners from the past such as Keifer Hahn, Alan King, Pat Judge, Scott Creel and Mike Telling. But, that meant some new faces, some new blood and some new excitement. The one thing that went directly according to plan was the performance of Jimmy Grant of Missoula. The 33-year old was granted the first starting slot as the top returning performer from last year. He took his 10 second starting gap and never looked back. Never really challenged during the race, he pushed on to a 43 second win with a time of 57:27. Post race, Grant commented that in many ways he preferred a later starting position and liked doing the chasing. But, it’s evident that he also does pretty well with the fear of being the hunted and running hard to stay in front of the pack.

Grant was a bit surprised at how well the run went today, having just competed in the Scotiabank Calgary Marathon over Memorial Day Weekend (May 27<sup>th</sup>). His 2:31:44 time brought him home in 4<sup>th</sup> place and just off his goal of a sub-2:30 performance. But, buoyed by his performance today, he’s thinking about taking another marathon shot in two weeks at the Missoula Marathon.

2<sup>nd</sup> place was wrapped up by Butte native Clint Choquette. Having made a big jump in his training volume this year (from 20+ miles per week to 50+), Clint has also made a big jump in performance. Now living in Billings (and set to compete for MSU-Billings this fall in cross country – using his one available year of eligibility), Choquette moved up from his #4 starting position to compete the course in a fine time of 58:10



**Jimmy Grant of Missoula was seeded first out the starting gate and he proved that seeding correct by running away from the field for a 43-second victory with a finish time of 57:27.**

Photo courtesy of Mike Chapman

Helena’s Thomas “Big-Bird” Jodoin (the 2008 and 2009 champion) continued his 5 year string of top 3 finishes, hitting 59:03. Rounding out the top 5 (and the sub-1 hour performers) were race-newbie Devin Cowan of Helena in 59:32; and, race director and master’s stud Ray Hunt (Deer Lodge) in 59:52.

The master’s races are based on two criteria. There are the traditional age-group results. But, the primary awards are based on age-graded criteria. In this format, your time is adjusted based on your age – trying to equalize your time against those of the younger, under-40 crowd. The men’s master’s race was just as cut and dried, with Ray Hunt’s 5<sup>th</sup> overall place giving him a clear (3:23) win over Steve Bruner’s (Bozeman) 63:15. On the age graded front, Ray kept the top slot there as well. His adjusted time of 54:20 didn’t quite hit his 53:48 record of 2010 (where he literally ran himself sick). But, it was good enough to pull in the \$75 prize money for the sub-56:00 age graded premium. The rest of the top 5 age graded looked a lot like the overall 40+ results. Kirk Keller was #2 with his 58:16 adjusted time – followed by Marvin Speece at 58:19, Bruner at 59:32; and, Phillipsburg’s Kyle Klickir at 59:48.

The women’s race held a little more to form. But, the big question at the start was who was going to have the best comeback. Would it be defending champion Sarah Graves of Ballantine, returning to competition after the Olympic Marathon Trials in January? Or, would it be 2009 champion Nicole Hunt of Deer Lodge – who gave birth to twin boys Roam and Ember last fall (October)?

**Nicole Hunt of Deer Lodge took the women’s lead with a hard effort on the final climb to the summit.**



Photo courtesy of Jon Wick

Graves was out first, with Hunt starting just 20 seconds back. Although she indicated that she didn’t feel really sharp, Graves took it out hard over the first half of the race – she’s a racer through and through. Hunt got out a bit easier over the first 5 kilometers; but, then began a big charge leading to the 2<sup>nd</sup> big climb at about 7 kilometers – where she made contact with Graves. They continued to run in this order until a bit past the 40:00 mark (near 8K), when Nicole went around and made a big push over the top and through the downhill last 5K. The result, a 42 second win over Sarah 67:58 to 68:40. As the topping on the day, her time set a new course record by 78 seconds, earning the \$75 record bonus.

Nicole has made some big forward progress on her racing fitness over the last two months and looks to be well on her way back to being one of the top master’s women in the US. Who knows how amazing she could be if the boys would just let her get a full night’s sleep ☺

Another Wulfman newbie was master’s runner Jenny Newton of Missoula. Her 72:35 placed her third, about a minute ahead of 17 year old (and high school senior to be) Olivia Wood of Anaconda (whose 73:27 replicated here 4<sup>th</sup> place performance of last year). The top 5 was wrapped up by Michele Bazzanella of Butte in 74:07 (who once again made up several batches of incredible chili for the post race feast).

For the women’s master’s – the age group ace was Nicole Hunt. As the overall winner, her 75:58 gun time was also clearly the top master’s time. Nicole also “owned” the age-graded division. Her adjusted time was 64:40, smashing the old record by 2 ½ minutes; and bringing home another \$150 record bonus. Next on the list was ageless Debbie Magilke of Billings. Setting the age graded record for the northbound course in 2011, she had a whopping 24 minute + age adjustment from 91:50 to 67:19. Following Debbie in the age-graded results were Jenny Newton (69:35), Julie Gilchrist (70:46) and Kathy Peterson (71:38)

As I’ve noted previously – the great course, fantastic organization and superb competition will continue to make this a must-do event on the Montana race calendar. As for the Buzzard himself – it was a nice run. My fitness levels right now didn’t make it realistic for me to race. So, I enjoyed the course and had a good trail run. Plus, I got the opportunity to touch base with all kinds of friends (old and new) and acquaintances. Add in a pint of good post race beer and some warm sunny weather – what more could an old bird ask for? See you on the roads, tracks and trails. - The Muddy Buzzard