

"Wild in Seventh Heaven" (Mourne Seven Sevens - British Championship) Magazine Race Report

Plandemic

2019 saw the last hosting of a British championship race on these shores by NIMRA with the Mourne Highline race. The forecast was looking good for another successful hosting of a similar event in 2020 until everything stopped dead in its tracks with Covid. A noticeable effect the lockdown had on not just fell runners, but to a sizeable chunk of the general public was the yearn for the mountains and the open spaces. The Mournes throughout 2020 and 2021 seen record numbers visiting and appreciating its landscape and fell runners were never out of sight. The extra welcome training time that was afforded would no doubt hold some in good stead when racing would eventually resume.

NIMRA eventually got to hold a condensed but full, local championship between June-September 2021, and it was clear that the appetite had grown for these events to continue to be ever present. 2022 was bringing better prospects and a post on the website at Christmas 2021 confirmed the calendar would return to normal with the addition of the hosting of long category race for the British championship and it would be the classic Seven Sevens race, which takes in the 700m+ peaks of the Mournes in a loop, starting and finishing at sea level in the coastal town of Newcastle. As winter left and spring begun, the multitude of planning began from the committee, with numerous meetings in the background, designating tasks, permits, sponsorship, personnel, results processing, photography, etc. All with the positive expectation the event would be a notable success.

Baltic!

An expression heard a few times by the English, Welsh & Scots contingent when mixing with their local counterparts outside Race HQ, a northern Irish thesaurus would inform you that it was a chilly start to the day. Donard had an ice blasted head on its top 50 metres or so, but visibility was thankfully not going to cause any problems. The main discussions there for the route was 3 optional lines in particular: Black Stairs or Glen River towards Donard, numerous selection choices between Commedagh & Hares Gap en route to Bearnagh, and whether the Binnian chute direct from Ben Crom Dam was more viable rather than skirting over the crossroads of the Binnian/Lamagan col. As the whistle blasted from the football pitch at 10am, some probably still hadn't made up their mind and just to follow whoever in front. The first obstacle was going through a narrow gap in the fence just after the football pitch, which got brought a few laughs from the runners as they politely queued to let each other through. Avoiding possible congestion on the main hiking path through the forest, the route directed the competitors on the fire road west of the forest below Drinahilly to the third bridge, breaking the field up past the icehouse and into the open glen. Most then opted for the Black Stairs route and the first sharp incline of the day towards Donard's summit (850m).

A wind chill of -10C here meant covers were still on most, but as they descended west towards Commedagh (767m) and away from the easterly breeze from the Irish Sea, the thermostat level was beginning to increase. Most of the field dropped to the very runnable Brandy Pad shortly after the Commedagh tower, whilst others followed the handrail of the Mourne Wall to their right-hand side. A nice set of stairs from Hares Gap brought the mighty Bearnagh (739m) into view with a selection of

lines up its east side past the north tor and to the wall corner at the summit and checkpoint 3. The sharpest descent of the day from here brings the Meels ahead, firstly the technical climb tight to the wall up Meelmore (687m) and a straightforward down and up following the Mourne Wall to the neighbour Meelbeg (702m), taking checkpoints 4 & 5. Did the runners feel this was going in too quick, already five of the seven completed?

Getting it tight

With visibility still perfect, the runners had handy sight of the river from Meelbeg between Ben Crom & Doan to aim at, a less faint but still challenging boggy path down towards the Ben Crom Dam. Cramp would have reared its ugly head here for quite a few on the long run down to the lowest point since the beginning of the race, checkpoint 6 at the dam. Nevertheless, the long obstacle of Binnian (747m) lay ahead where the traverse ran in both directions out and back. From the north tor along the ridge the runners were welcomed back to an exposed breeze from the sea again, similarly across on the summit of the final seven, Lamagan (704m). The long crawl to here from the crossroads can be never ending, only for the runners to be rewarded after with two smaller hills, Cove and Beg standing in their road before sight of home! Cove can largely be contoured but to take a direct bearing towards the saddle at the Donard/Commedagh col, further climbing almost to the summit of Beg is required.

At the 17-mile mark from the saddle, there is a straightforward path somewhat back down the glen towards Donard Park in Newcastle. However, race organiser Ricky Cowan was not satisfied without throwing in a final twist to finish the day off. For safety reasons, yes, the taped mountain bike trails through the Donard forest meant runners were not bowling balls into skittles of hikers coming up the main path. For entertainment purposes, watching weary legs leaping over fallen tree obstacles and built ramps in the fashion of the horses racing the same day at the Grand National in Aintree was certainly worth it, and a budding photographer got herself in great position to document the drama here. A small section back on the fire road, then down the grass hill and back onto the football field and level ground witnessed more & more smiles appear from those darting to the line!

Where the Wild things are

It hadn't taken long for Finlay Wild to set his stall out as he took less than 40mins to get to the summit of Slieve Donard. Once he took the lead, he would never let it slip as he continued to put time on his closest competitors at every summit. It was not that long ago that people said that 4hrs would be impossible to go under, but Finlay would take the record down to 3hrs 28 mins. The battle for the podium places was closer than ever as Matthew Atkinson and Harry Bolton (Keswick club mates) would fight it out right to the line. In the end Matthew Atkinson would take second with Harry in third. The women's race was a much closer affair with the top 4 separated by only 6mins it could have been anyone's race. Victoria Thompson from Helm Hill would manage to cling on to a 2 min advantage made on the way up Slieve Donard. She could not afford any mistakes as her teammate Janie Oates was in a battle with Katie Reynolds and Eve Pannone who would swap places

right through the race. When they made it to the finish line all 4 ladies would smash the 5-hour mark with Victoria Thompson claiming victory followed by her teammate Janie Oates with Katie Reynolds completing the podium. Eve Pannone who would just miss out on a podium would claim the 1st U23 prize.

In the V40's Mary Gillie from Eryri Harriers would claim that prize with Helen Elmore from Dark Peak taking the V50's for the women. The men V40's would go to Oli Johnston Dark Peak, V50 to Kenny Richmond Helm Hill and V60 went to Philip Pearson Northern Fell Runners. The local runners would see a superb race from Adam Cunningham Mourne Runners who came in 6th overall, Steven Shields would only be a sliver over the 4hrs taking 11th and Jonny Steede would claim the 2nd MV40 prize with Gary Bailey taking the third MV40. In the ladies Elizabeth Wheeler from Glens Runners would put in an awesome performance to take 15th place overall.

When the race was over competitors made their way back to HQ to be fed and watered from a brilliant team of ladies. They kept the soup, tea, coffee and buns well stocked. With the prize giving over it was time to thank the many volunteers who helped set up the course, stand on the cold mountain tops, sort out the results, take the photographs and the many other things that go into putting on a race. A big thank you to our sponsors Regatta/Dale Farm and O'Hare's Pub who provided prizes. Many thanks to all the runners for coming to support this iconic race which we hope will have you coming back for more.