**Meall an T-Suidhe** **– Graham Brooks Memorial:** 1st July 2023

**Distance:** 5.6 km; **Climb:** 460 metres

More than three months had elapsed since the first race of the 2023 UK Athletics Hill & Fell Running Championships in Northern Ireland, when runners headed to New Town Park in Fort William for the second race in the series, the Meall an T-Suidhe – Graham Brooks Memorial race, henceforth referred to as ‘Melantee’, organised by Lochaber AC. Melantee, which was also the third counter in the Scottish Hill Runners championship, starts with a lap around the field, followed by a short section on tarmac. The route leaves the road and onto a rough bog and up across the burn and onto the steep climb to the summit. The descent follows the same route back and finishes with a lap around the park.

As usual in short championship events, there are separate races for the women and the men; the women started at midday and the men at 2pm, which resulted in many of the men cheering the seventy-eight women on the course and vice versa. Sara Willhoit (Mercia), who had finished fourth at the Mourne Maurauder, led the way on the trod through the bracken on the way up and was first to the summit in 21:43, eight seconds ahead of Holly Page (Carnethy). Around a minute later, Victoria Wilkinson (Bingley) and Nichola Jackson (Keswick), crested the hill followed by Antonia Fan (Ambleside) and Eve Pannone (Eden), a further forty seconds further back. However, it was the slippery descent that decided the outcome of the race; Nichola, the winner in Northern Ireland, descended in 10:51, over a minute quicker than any other woman, finishing in a time of 33:44, four seconds ahead of Sara and equalling the course record set by Angela Mudge in 1999. Holly finished in third place (34;28). Nicola heads the Women’s championship standing followed by Sara, with Antonia in the bronze medal position after finishing in fifth place.

Eve, the Women’s u23 champion for the last two years finished in sixth place; Alice Gamble (Sheffield University) was the only other u23 in the field and leads the championship. Previous Open and/or v40 British champions, led by Victoria in fourth place, filled the first five v40 positions; Vic was followed by Sharon Taylor (Helm Hill) whilst Angela Mudge (Ochil), Mel Price (Mercia) and Lou Osborn (Ambleside) were also the leading v50s. Mel heads both the v40 and v50 championships followed in the v40s by Rachel Pilling (Pudsey & Bramley), one point ahead of Rhian Probert (Mynydd Du); Rhian holds second place in the v50s with Deborah Gowans (Todmorden) in third.

The first three Women’s Open teams, Westerlands , Mercia and Carnethy, were separated by only three points. The winners in Ireland, Ambleside, could only finish fourth but kept the championship lead, followed by Carnethy and Mercia. There were no complete Women’s v40 teams at the Mourne Maurauder, so all the medals were still up for grabs; Mercia were the winners ahead of Lochaber and Ochil with Helm Hill in fourth.

Over 150 runners lined up for the men’s race over a course that had been churned up by the women. Jamie Crowe (Central) set the early pace, but it was the 2022 British champion, Finlay Wild, running for the host club, who closed the gap and reached the summit first in 18:49, three seconds ahead of the 2021 champion, Chris Richards (Helm Hill) and fourteen seconds ahead of Jamie. Under 23, Finlay Grant (Dark Peak) was fourth at the top, forty seconds behind Finlay Wild, with Billy Cartwright, ten seconds further back. Billy (8:59) and Finlay Grant (9:06) both had faster descents than race winner, Finlay Wild (9:09/27:58) and second placed, Chris (9:38/28:30) who finished only six seconds ahead of Finlay Grant with Billy, three further seconds in arrears. Billy keeps his lead in the championship, ahead of Finlay Grant and Matthew Elkington (Ambleside), who finished the race in eighth place.

Matthew’s clubmate Ben Sharrock registered the fastest descent of the day (8:40), finishing in tenth place, one place and two seconds ahead of Tom Wood (Eryri), as second and third in the u23 category behind Finlay Grant. Finlay and Ben are joint leaders in the u23 standings with Tom, the 2021 champion, in third. The leading v40 man was the winner in Northern Ireland, Steven Hebblethwaite (Keswick), in fifteenth place, closely followed by Rob Jebb (Helm Hill), looking to add to his three earlier v40 titles. Third v40 was Andrew Fallas (Carnethy), following his second place at the Mourne Maurauder. In the v50s, Karl Gray (Calder Valley), who also holds bronze medal position behind Steven and Andrew in the v40s, is on track to retain his title after another victory. Karl was only ten seconds ahead of 2022 v50 bronze medalist, Kenny Richmond (Helm Hill), who is looking to go one place better in 2023. Andrew Macrae (Carnethy) was third v50, followed by Shaun Godsman (Calder Valley), who keeps third place overall. Leading v60 was six times British champion (three open and three v40), Colin Donnelly (Cambuslang). Paul Cornforth (Ambleside) was second, followed by Duncan Ball (Penicuik). After his victory in Northern Ireland, reigning champion, fourth placed, Stewart Whitlie (Carnethy) retained his overall lead with Adrian Davis (Lomond Hill Runners) and David Griffin (Helm Hill), who had finished in fifth and seventh place, tied for second in the standings.

With five runners in the first twenty-three, Keswick got back on track in their search for a sixth consecutive Men’s Open title after their third-place finish in Northern Ireland. Irish winners, Carnethy could only manage third place behind Dark Peak and are level on points with Keswick but have a higher aggregate score. Dark Peak have moved up into the bronze medal position. In the Men’s v40 teams, Helm Hill just edged out Calder Valley thus reversing the placing at the Mourne Marauder, but Calder Valley keep the overall lead with a lower aggregate score. Third place for Carnethy put them in the bronze medal position. Calder Valley’s v50s were again dominant, finishing well ahead of Helm Hill and Carnethy, these also being the overall positions.

*On behalf of the British Athletics Mountain Running Advisory Group Sub-Committee (MRAG), I would like to thank Lochaber AC for their excellent organisation.*

**Ian Hartman**