**2023 British Athletics Hill & Fell Running Championships**

Mourne Marauder **- 25th March 2023**

**Distance:** 16 km; **Climb:** 1,200 metres

Fell runners from across the UK descended on the coastal town of Newcastle (County Down) for the first race of the 2023 British Athletics Hill & Fell Running Championships, the Mourne Maurauder. The race which commemorates the airmen who lost their lives in plane crashes around the race route during the Second World War, started in Donard Park and visited Slieve Donard summit, Chimney Rock mountain summit and Slieve Commedagh summit before returning to the park.

After a week of rain, the weather was dry for the 218 runners who lined up on the start line. With Alexander Chepelin (Carnethy) setting the early pace, the leaders didn’t take long to reach the first checkpoint at the quarry. However, William Cartwright (Matlock) was hot on his heels on the way up to Slieve Donard summit. The Ambleside pair of Ben Sharrock and, 2022 English champion, Matthew Elkington led the chasing group.

The women’s race would see a battle between the gold & silver medal winners in the 2022 English championship, Hannah Russell (Helm Hill) and Nichola Jackson Keswick) together with Naomi Lang (Carnethy). Nichola opened up an early lead with Naomi and Hannah trying to chase her down.

The rare sight of sunshine would make the task of navigating to the summit of Chimney Rock mountain much easier than normal but, the heat would take its toll on quite a few of the runners expecting cold weather. As the race headed back to Slieve Commedagh, runners could see who was chasing who and get the opportunity to take in the great views before tackling the steep climb.

In the Men’s race, William had taken the lead on the climb and would press on down a slippery and rocky descent to the firebreak. Alexander chased William right to the finish line, but William claimed the victory in 1:33:15, just over half a minutes ahead of Alexander. The battle to complete the podium and lead the under 23s would be won by Ben in 1:34:01 even after taking a few tumbles on the greasy descent to the fire break. It was great to see four other u23 Men in the top 12, Finlay Grant (Dark Peak) in 5th , Felix Wilson (Carnethy) in 6th, Kieran Cooper (Carnethy) in 8th and Tom Wood (Eryri), the 2021 British u23 champion in 12th.

Nichola managed to hold on to her early lead and finish in 26th place (1:47:21). The race for the other podium places would be fought all the way with Naomi (1:49:57) snatching second place from Hannah (1:51:49). The leading Women’s u23 was Lily Higgins (Ambleside), followed by Finty Royle (Lancaster University) and Alice Gamble (Sheffield University).

Mel Price (Mercia), British v40 champion in 2015 and 2018, celebrated her 50th birthday last year but was still the leading v40 just over a minute ahead of last year’s silver medalist, Bianca Dyer (Helm Hill) with another v50, Rhian Probert (Mynydd Du) in third place. Deborah Gowans, the 2022 English v55 champion (Todmorden) was third v50.

The leading v40 man was Steven Hebblethwaite (Keswick) in eleventh place followed by Andrew Fallas (Carnethy) in 19th with 2022 v50 champion, Karl Gray (Calder Valley) only one position behind. The second and third v50s were 2022 bronze medalist, Kenny Richmond (Helm Hill) only 24 seconds ahead of Shaun Godsman (Calder Valley). First v60 was reigning champion, Stewart Whitlie (Carnethy); Stewart was over 12 minutes ahead of second and third placed Steve Rhodes (Hyde Park Harriers) and David Griffin (Helm Hill) who were separated by only eleven seconds.

In the Open Men’s team competition, Keswick suffered a setback in their search for their sixth consecutive title with a third-place finish behind Carnethy and local rivals, Ambleside, who pipped them by a single point. Calder Valley were more successful in their quest to repeat their 2022 v40/v50 team double. Helm Hill, who won silver medals in both these categories in 2022, had to play second fiddle to Calder Valley again. Dark Peak were third in the v40s with Cheshire Hill Racers taking third place in the v50s.

Three clubs were separated by only three points in the Women’s Open; Helm Hill, looking for a fifth consecutive title were one point adrift of Ambleside and only two points ahead of Carnethy. No complete teams finished in the Women’s v40 category.

*On behalf of the British Athletics Mountain Running Advisory Group Sub-Committee (MRAG), I would like to thank race organiser, Richard Cowan and the Northern Ireland Mountain Running Association (NIMRA) for their excellent organisation and acknowledge the use of Richard’s race report from the NIMRA website (nimra.co.uk).*

**Ian Hartman**