

Messier Biathlon A Runaway!

Skies on Sunday, the 6th of October were not conducive to astronomical ventures. A quick perusal of satellite images showed that a cloud mass had socked in most of the southeast, with the northern boundary being only about 50 miles from our location. Otherwise the weather was pleasant, but breezy.

During the past two years, attempts by our society to hold the Messier Biathlon, the cycling/observing event that has no equal, have met with similar weather conditions. In 1994 the iffy skies led to completion of the cycling part of the event, but there was no opportunity for observing. Last year's event was a complete washout. This year the assembled teams of cyclists and observers met at Gardner-Webb University's Williams Observatory at 4:00 p.m. on October 6th to assess the situation. The consensus was to go ahead and hold the 13-mile cycling portion of the biathlon, and schedule the observing portion for the following Thursday night. The three cyclists mounted their machines (one team dropped out due to a last minute out-of-town conflict) and rolled away from the Observatory at approximately 5:30 p.m. They were to complete 15 laps of a circuit adjacent to the facility, with cycling times recorded upon completion. Roger Ivester, an accomplished cyclist and observer, was first to pedal himself to completion, in a time of 39:17. He was followed by Tom English exactly three minutes later. Allen Sanders was third, battling cramps and a borrowed bicycle to finish in 56:42.

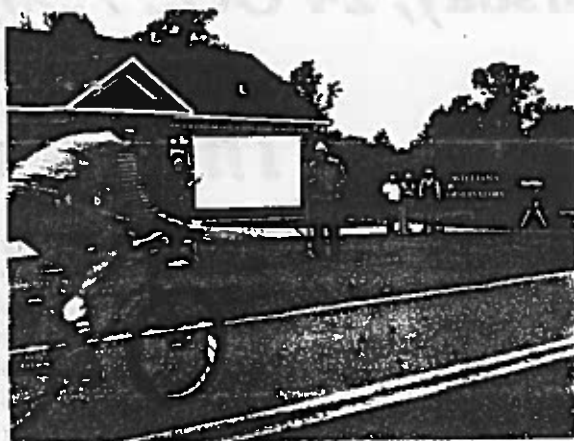
The plan was to break for dinner at the local Italian restaurant and return for observing at 8:00, but clouds forced postponement until Thursday the 10th. Still, the group couldn't pass up an evening of fine food and astronomical conversation.

By the time Thursday rolled around, the observing session had turned into a foodfest as well, as Bettie Morrow orchestrated an impromptu meal to get us ready for the night at hand (as usual, astronomy and gastronomy combined forces). The weather again showed its ugly head, as the afternoon satellite image showed a finger of clouds over western NC, northern GA, and eastern TN. By the time we had eaten and pulled out our equipment, though, the skies had opened up - almost completely. Thus the observing portion for the Messier Biathlon would indeed get underway - for the first time since the inaugural 1993 edition. The teams readied their charts, observing lists, and instruments, and at 8:30, the race was on. Defending champions Tom English and Max Morrow were assisted by Observatory Assistant Brian Capel in their use of an 8-inch Schmidt Cassegrain. Allen Sanders and Tommy Fomey worked with BoB Eskridge at BoB's 14½-inch Dob. Roger Ivester, assisted in viewing by Tom Greene, recruited the remainder of the club to assist him by keeping track of multiple stopwatches, flashlights, and observing data. Remember, this is the man who gave a talk on "optimized observing" at our regional astronomy meeting (BoBfest) last January. Roger's superb organization and well-honed observing skills made it unlikely that Tom and Max would successfully defend their title by making up the three minute deficit. (Recall that Roger spent the past year contributing detailed observing notes on the 105 (+1) Finest Deep Sky Objects to this newsletter. Many of the objects on the Messier Biathlon observing list were also on the 105 list.)

We were supposed to use a secret list of 20 "Messier Class" objects and double stars prepared by a prominent regional astronomer, but the list never materialized. We improvised by putting together a list of relatively easy targets ranging from binocular objects, to double stars, to NGC objects. The list included nine objects from the actual Messier Catalog. The lingering threat of clouds rolling through led to the decision that - just in case of partial obscuration - each team would observe any 15 of the objects given on the list of 20 (the full list is reproduced below).

Once the observing was underway, the groups frantically worked their way through the list. Roger's group seemed to be a well oiled machine, with coordinates and descriptions calmly relayed back and forth between coordinator, observer, and recorder. Allen, Tommy, and BoB stumbled a bit at first, as they puzzled over which eyepieces to use, and Tom, Max and Brian started slowly as well - they misplaced their observing list and had to deal with a loose declination circle. All along the steady ticking of the WWV time signal counted the observers along. By the Tom and BoB got their teams in the groove of observing, there came the call of "finished!" from the grass at the end of the observing pad. "What?" they exclaimed. But it was true; Roger and Tom (Greene) had viewed their 15 objects and all were duly recorded. Their time: 18:37, giving them a total event time of 57:54. The others were dumfounded - how could he have observed 15 objects in 18½ minutes? Optimized observing indeed!

At this time the other groups had only logged about half a dozen objects, and a few light clouds were beginning to drift across the sky. Both groups were targeting M11 and M26 when a cloud rolled across Scutum and Aquila, further delaying their efforts. For the next twenty minutes they dodged clouds, collecting occasional objects and scanning the skies for appropriate openings. Roger's group went inside for a leisurely cup of coffee. Finally, after 1:05:09, Tom English called time for his group. By this time it was evident that BoB, Allen, and Tommy had thrown in the towel, as they were changing eyepieces for a high power view of Comet Hale-Bopp. The fourth annual Messier Biathlon was history. It was history-making as well, as it is not likely that Roger's observing time will be matched in the future. Or will it? We'll have to wait until next year to see.



Final Results, 1996 CCAS Messier Biathlon

Ivester, Greene: 57:54
 English, Morrow: 1:47:26
 Sanders, Eskridge: DNF

1996 Messier Biathlon Observing List

Globular Clusters:	M13	M56	M71	M15	
Double Stars:	70 Oph	δ Cep	γ Del	ζ Aqr	52 Cyg
Open Clusters:	M11	M26	IC 4665	Brocchi's Cluster	
Planetary Nebulae:	M27	NGC 6826			
Galaxies:	M31	NGC 404			
Other:	Hale-Bopp (comet)		μ Cep (red star)		M17 (diffuse nebula)