

**First timer's SIPR
Liz Barker on Reeve (2016)**

Tuesday May 10th - Ten days before the race starts

I see an online message that someone is looking for a runner for SIPR. I don't know the guy really. We once shared a moment on the Glencoe Skyline race up on the Aonach Eagach ridge watching a huge black crow ride the updraught. I check the dates of the race... Well, I *am* free that weekend.... I briefly debate what running with Bjorn would be like and make my decision purely on the basis that someone who seems at home on the Aonach Eagach ridge is probably ok to run with for SIPR. I send Bjorn my running CV.

Wednesday May 11th morning:

Bjorn asks if I have any sailing experience... I am honest and say I have only read Swallows and Amazons books as a child. I wonder if rereading them as an adult counts for more experience. I hope that I get some points for enthusiasm and tell them that aged eight I persuaded my parents to row down the entire length of Coniston so we could explore Peel Island. Wait nervously as I really want to race now.

Evening of May 11th:

Bjorn comes back and says they'd love to have me. I am really happy and incredibly excited. We are doing the Jura fell race the weekend after the race so I send a cryptic message to Jim just saying "Do you want anything stashed on the Paps?" to which he immediately replies "Are you doing SIPR?!"

Phone my Mum (former sailor) to tell her, whose first response is "What type of yacht is it?" I realise I have no idea, but ask Bjorn and wonder if I should have asked that earlier.

I set about being as ready as I can in a short space of time.

I message Helene (Whitaker, nee Diamantides) asking if she has any tips. "Take small pots of rice pudding ashore to eat on landing if you've been seasick" is her first tip. I buy some Stugeron.

I read some of the past race logs on the SIPR website. They all seem to mention violent seasickness and vomit. I buy more Stugeron and some wet wipes.

I ask a friend who sails for tips on how to be seaman like. "Keep low in the boat. And do exactly as you're told."

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Friday May 13th:

I realise that although I've agreed to race, I haven't actually asked for time off from work yet. I prepare a carefully worded, optimistic email to my boss assuring him that 'wind dependent' I should be back working by Monday afternoon. He agrees - and tells me to stay low in the boat.

Sunday May 15th:

My training leading up to the race isn't what you'd call 'ideal'. Although I've been fell running over the winter and doing some races in the Spring, this last couple of weeks I have been cycling and I am committed to a 75 mile cycle sportive today, followed by running the 3000m on the track at an Athletics meet the next day. I get round the sportive, avoid pushing too hard and just try to stay in one piece. The next day I do the absolute minimum to win the 3000m (which slightly cruelly means pipping the race leader in the home straight). Then I try my best to taper and rest...

The Race

Sailing to Mull

Everyone tells me the Oban run is "just a jog" and "doesn't count", but that turns out to be a big understatement. Still, we get the run-that-turned-out-to-be-a-sprint done, and get down to the shore. As a former rower, I (over)confidently thought rowing us out to Reeve would suit me

well. It doesn't suit me. Used to rowing in responsive narrow sculls with big carbon fibre blades rather than inflatable bathtubs with tiny wooden oars we get blown all over the place by the cross wind and it goes pretty badly. Thankfully, Bjorn takes over and quickly masters the art of rowing the bathtub and we get out to the waiting Reeveer in the end.

Sailing out to Salen with the fleet I discover that doing 8 knots heeled over in a 36 ft yacht off the West coast of Scotland is absolutely brilliant and I overwrite my few memories of dull dinghy sailing, drifting across muddy reservoirs and harbours in the rain and next to no wind.

A text comes through. It is an auto text from the hairdressers I go to 'reminding me' that I am due a haircut soon... My hair is currently unwashed, scraped into a ponytail, windswept, tangled and sweaty from the sprint round Oban.

Ben More

I start to have some doubts about Bjorn as a running partner when he tells me he brought 5 different pairs of running shoes. I wonder if he has brought shoe horns for them as well and have worrying visions of waiting around soaked and cold at Loch Ba while he changes shoes, inserts shoe horns and fusses over shoes bags and pink tissue paper.

When skipper Gordon and helm Nigel hear Bjorn has brought a complete shoe shop with him he immediately gets nicknamed 'Imelda' (Marcos) for the rest of the trip.

Nigel - perhaps with his Scottish Athletics / UK Athletics hat on - tries to get Bjorn and I to 'Do a Bolt' before we set off for Ben More. Largely ignorant of the subtleties of different victory poses by track sprinters we do a poor job (see photo) and Nigel is openly dismayed by our ineptness, muttering under his breath something about 'bloody hill runners' and demonstrating what it should have looked like (sorry we didn't get a photo). But he looks more pleased when we arrive back in under 5 hours despite wet, claggy conditions, having navigated and run well, overtaking several teams, and we get underway quickly.

Jura

The Paps are absolutely stunning and I have moments of pure joy climbing up and running down the steep scree of the Paps in the sunshine surrounded by views out to Colonsay, Islay and shining blue waters. When we get back to Reeveer I message Jim to say he may have been usurped as I have fallen in love with Jura. He says he looks forward to meeting Jura next weekend.

Sailing to Arran

Incredibly, we leave Craighouse in 11th place after a good run on Jura, but know this position will quickly dissolve as all the boats around us head to a standstill at the next tide gate. Our strategy to keep west under the pretext of catching the forecast west wind to later blow us round the Mull of Kintyre is admirable, but really designed by Nigel so he can find the treasure at



the end of the rainbow and contend for the new SIPR 'poster boy' photo competition (see image).

As we approach the Mull I fall asleep, and six hours later wake up at dawn to find us in the exact same position with a full moon shining over the still water. We get the oars out. Rowing round the Mull of Kintyre I recall my rowing knowledge and teach the crew how to get what's known in rowing circles as 'backsplash' to make for the most efficient rowing. They are amused, but interested and start to compete with each other on who can get the oar into the water best...

There is a brief, unexpected tsunami off the tip of the Mull, but we ride the huge wave train perfectly, bows into the waves. Yet the excitement quickly subsides afterwards as we still have next to no wind and need to make the tide gate.

With so little wind, we decide to get the mps up with the help of Mikel - our foredeck and kitesurfing expert. It brings up our speed noticeably, and he is in his element flying his 'kite' which is lovely to see. But to keep it up and full, we have to head SE rather than NE toward Pladda...

My Dad - who you could describe as 'focused' - has already been texting updates with detailed positions of the other boats in front and behind us. We are surprised to hear we are a close second in our class to Marisca who is a lighter boat and better in light wind. Now he starts sending concerned messages enquiring why we are heading in totally the wrong direction close to Ailsa Craig... Complex discussions about how to best get the mps onto the other side of the boat continue on the foredeck and Bjorn and I watch anxiously as we lose 4 places to the boats behind us taking a direct line to Pladda.

Bjorn (not an experienced sailor) announces confidently he is going to jibe. A split second later, Nigel appears on deck from his sleep looking like he has just had a heart attack, still in his underwear and bed socks and kindly but firmly offers to take over..... At last we jibe and start heading back toward Pladda.

Sailing to Troon

We are now on a mission for the Goat Fell run. With Bjorn pushing the pace even more as we climb, we overtake most of the crews who passed us on our scenic detour to Ailsa Crag. We almost linger on the summit staring north and west across the Arran fells but I remind Bjorn that we are racing not rambling and we set off down again.

As soon as we are onboard again at Lamlash, I get the oars out and ready again as there is no wind to get us out of the harbour. But as we make it out into the Clyde the wind rapidly picks up to the extent that we need to take the mps down and get the genoa up. It is now dark, we have 20 knots of wind, a fair bit of swell and we need all hands on deck... I think it's the most exciting Sunday night I've had in a while.

We approach Troon harbour in pitch black night with yachts racing in all around us. One in front and two behind; one so close we can see their white hull in the darkness. As the black harbour wall looms in the night, Gordon drops our mainsail just before we reach it and we slip pretty slickly into the outer harbour. Bjorn and I get ready to row ashore as fast as we can, but the pressure eases when the yacht right behind us suddenly crash tacks, to loop round again for a second try.

As we haul the dinghy out of the water and run along the maze of pontoons in wellies in the dark at 1am in the morning, scrabbling for the button to open the marina gate, it feels like a sort of surreal Treasure Hunt or Crystal Maze challenge. All we need are neon jumpsuits and we could be the next Anneka Rice.

At race HQ we discover we are 15th overall and 2nd in our class to Marisca and run back to tell the good news to Gordon, Nigel and Mikel as they come into berth. Red wine appears from somewhere and we rustle up crumbs of not-yet-eaten chocolate. As it's 2am we go to sleep pretty soon, but with a cupboard full of unused Stugeron and wet wipes I am already thinking about next year....