

The Scottish Islands Peaks Race 2009

Scrabble Scribble:

I had managed to tear the mainsail in a gale when singlehanded delivering Scrabble to Oban so for the race, I took my spare older and slightly smaller sails up with me in the car. Then when the forecast predicted possible heavy weather, I decided to fit these smaller sails but I needed a helping hand from my crew and not too much wind to do it in. As a result these jobs were still waiting to be done on Friday morning so, as soon as the briefing was over, we then had to get busy fitting the sails. Unfortunately, this proved to be a real struggle as the luff rope kept jamming in the feeder but we eventually got the mainsail hoisted and could heave a collective sigh of relief before quickly rolling it away so we could start on the jib. That rush led to our undoing at the start as the roller mainsail jammed in the mast and would not release when we tried to unroll it. Our runners, Alec and Henry had completed the Oban run in fourth place but by the time we decided to start anyway (under just the jib alone), we were somewhere in the latter half of the fleet.

The exit from Oban Bay is in the lee of the castle and the winds are frequently very flukey there. That, plus the incoming tide and the unbalanced rig, meant that we found ourselves blanketed by other boats and unable to point high enough to clear the rocks at the entrance to the Oban Bay. Fortunately, the rules allow the use of engines to get out of tricky situations and so we were able to go astern and try again but it took a long time to clear the entrance (not helped by the ferry coming in whilst we were all jilling about in the flukey winds). We were eventually one of the last boats to clear the entrance but it did mean that the Adventure Show cameraman Paul had lots of opportunity to film the close quarters action as boats under full sail came past us as we were struggling along just under our small jib.

Very soon we were soon in last place as we jogged slowly along but once clear of the other boats we could again try to free our jammed roller mainsail. Barry even went up the mast to try tucking it in thus helping it to unroll but we still could not clear it; until suddenly after he had come down, the motion of the boat completed Barry's good work and the sail magically unrolled itself. We could now start to pull back the boats that had passed us and we even hoisted the spinnaker to make the most of the wind and managed to pull back a few places.

Our runners, Alec and Henry then did brilliant runs on Ben More with the result that we left Mull in ninth place and even pulled up a couple more places in the overnight sail to Jura. Despite the poor visibility, they did another good run on the Paps which brought us up to fourth position overall and leading our class as we set out from Craighouse. At first, the weather was very good as we sailed for the Mull of Kintyre

but the closer we got to it, the wind swung into the South East and increased giving us a hard beat under reduced sail. By the time we had fought our way to abreast of the Mull of Kintyre lighthouse, the seas had become increasingly steep with the result that the boat was being stopped as it broke through the crest of the waves and crashed down the other side. The wind was now gale force and so our sails were reefed well down which meant that although they were as much as the boat could stand when the boat was on the crest of a wave, they were then partially blanketed by the waves in the troughs. As a result, progress to windward was slow and when we tacked towards the Mull the tide swept us back with the result that, we had to try again but this time with a stronger tide opposing us.

At this point, my stomach decided to demonstrate its ability to command my full attention and after feeding the fish I had to leave the deck and take shelter below where I could lie down and get warm again. Brian and Barry soldiered (or should that be `sailored') on alone for several more hours into the night, I had tried to get up to help them but found it impossible due to cramp as well as seasickness. As a result of being short handed and exposed to a full gale for hours, they were getting too cold and tired to continue safely. Although the tide was about to change in our favour, they knew that this would then make the seas far worse and so they made the decision to put the engine on and retire. This was a decision which I thoroughly endorsed at the time (and even with hindsight, we all agree that it was the correct decision). Even with the engine running, it was still a demanding task to steer the boat through the night into safer waters as the chart plotter (and the wind instruments) chose this moment to fail.

The weather obviously plays a big part in all outdoor events but this is particularly the case in this race. The visibility on the hills was down to a few metres in the cloud on the tops and for most of the hill running there are no paths to take you to the summit checkpoints. The Mull of Kintyre is hazardous in strong winds as can be seen by the fact that 38 boats left Jura in the race but 23 retired on the Mull of Kintyre leg leaving only 15 stalwart finishers who battled their way round the Mull. A few managed to get round before the worst of the conditions, some were wise enough to wait at Jura until conditions improved and some no doubt made it through despite the weather; but the key point is that every competitor was successful because every one survived.

We like to think that this race takes people to places that they would not otherwise go. These places are not just the hill tops and coastal waters but also the mental and physical extremes that we do not normally experience in our comfortable lives.

From the competitors point of view, whilst it is always nice to win a prize, it is even more satisfying to come through a gale safely and so the 2009 race will live on in competitors' memories as one of the best precisely because it was one of the most testing to date. The gale was not much fun at the time but it certainly ensured that

the race qualifies for The Adventure Show where it will be shown in the next month or two.

Curly Mills