

Titanic got it easy...Scottish Island Peaks Race 2014

Brian & I dedicate our 2014 defence of King of the Bens to our much missed friend Elsie Scott, who for years was part of this race as much as any of the islands we visited.

Well, I can honestly say, fuck that was really hard!

Friday started in Oban with the fast 4 mile prologue in warm glorious sunshine, with tops off and a pleasant breeze, but we knew the fast approaching truth.

Westies Jacques, Niall, James, Brian & myself set off within a pack of 42 teams, with Niall & James leaping to the front for the first 300m, arms waving, shouting "WESTIES" and generally proclaiming victory before the end of the street – superb stuff!!

The prologue ends with a free-for-all dive into dinghies and a wild paddle like-the-clappers out to your yacht, before nautical dodgems out of Oban bay and across Loch Linnhe in increasing winds and wobbly seas. It was fast this year and our wee Class 3 cruiser, "Morag Mhor" hosed along just nicely ahead of loads of faster boats.

We landed at Salen on Mull just as the rain started, to the usual flurry of kit checks and dashing off down the road for the first of 24 miles. We moved well & steady, and up onto Ben Mores clag ridden east shoulder, passing about 8 teams in the process. However our speed lacked concentration and we balls it up missing the steep chute up onto a' Chioch's knife edge coll. We sprackled about for 10/15 minutes before taking the radical decision to use the map & compass, only to discover that the summit was directly above the cliff we stood at the foot of! We shrugged our now frozen and shaking shoulders and up we went, over slimy, glass-like rock surfaces with frozen fingers clutching at anything like a crack or knobble in the rock. It got scarier by the minute until after what seemed like eternity we popped onto a familiar eroded trod, leading finally to the summit, almost hypothermic. Fortunately we blasted around the rest of the tricky pea-soup route without incident, but were sure our King of the Bens hopes were dashed in dreadful 4.38. Not so, the fastest time was only 4.25 – we were 5th and still in it!!

The sea had thankfully calmed down enough to allow us to shower/eat/sleep but we just missed a tide at the Sound of Luing to Jura meaning a frustrating night for our crew of Kenny, Kate & Stephen - but lightened by anchoring behind a small island and watching all the other opposition washed helplessly back down the loch in the early hours of the morning!

When we landed on Jura in the rain and cloud level to zero, we told our crew to expect us about 4.30hrs based on Mull and on our previous times of over 4 hours. However, we had an absolute flier - I had a few new lines I wanted to try and we hit everything bang-on. We bashed over the Paps in thick, thick clag, high winds and pissing rain and kept passing other teams run lost running about in circles! We hit the road at Three Arch Bridge and we were buzzing, flying back to Craighouse and catching the finish marshals out by arriving back in 3.39 – I think they weren't sure if we had actually been to all the checkpoints! It is always great to see our Jane at races but at the end of this leg on Jura it is was a definite shot in the arm to get a happy giggle and soggy cuddle! Unfortunately our crew were also

caught on the hop and it was another 15 minutes before they picked us up from the shore, which was to cost them/us dear later on...

Now the fun began. As soon as we cleared the bay the water turned nasty. I abandoned any hope of a shower in the bouncing boat – Brian had just made it in & out before the fast-spin cycle started. We dived up top and got food down us as the waves got bigger and bigger. We both opted for the magic-tablets to try and cancel out the motion sickness, but it was in vain. I managed to fall unconscious with the effects of the pill for a few hours, only to be woken by a crash, scream “Fuck!” In almost complete darkness Brian’s bunk support-sheet had torn apart as we hit a big wave and he spilled out across the cabin. I raised my head enough to see him wrestle himself back into position and Skipper Kenny by torchlight appearing in time to shove a sheet of plywood down his side and jam him back in place. For hours I lay awake in the dark, the movements of the boat wildly violent and utterly unpredictable – the noise deafening and more than scary! The sound of water hosing past the bows and sides would suddenly stop with an eerie silence for a few seconds as the vessel became airborne, only to crash into the next huge wave with a sickening boom which gave you a fright every time, even though you knew it was coming. Eternity passed by then with another crash, scream, “Fuck!”, Brian tried in vain to dive for the bog, hitting every wall, ceiling and fitting in the process, before a horrific vomiting spraying effect across the cabin. He fell upsides down into the bog with the door smashing shut behind him for the next hour of absolute hell, eventually re-emerging drenched in his own body fluids and crawled into his sleeping bag, finally settling groaning pitifully on the only place left that he couldn’t fall out of – the floor – swimming in his own puke! The maelstrom continued and unbelievably got even worse. The crew were at absolute maximum limits on deck and could do nothing for us below. As I listened to poor Brian slip, slide and clatter across the cabin floor I held my own bunk sheet straps tightly trying to take my body weight off the sheet every time we hit another big wave – it was not to be. The usual threatening silence of an airborne launch was suddenly went on not for a few moments, but for seconds, minutes, hours – when the hit finally came it was absolutely nuclear. My bunk collapsed and my hand which had been gripped on the strap, ripped out with an explosion of pain; I landed on top of Brian with an almighty thud and loud “Aaaargh” from underneath! I was now wedged tightly against my partner in the gangway, barely able to move, lying in a moving puddle of his old vomit. With shredded nerves I pulled my sleeping bag hood up, pulled my beanie-hat down over my eyes and prayed to any bloody god that might vaguely exist to take me now! Hours passed, we had missed the Mull of Kintyre tide by a baw-hair (the 15 minutes lost leaving Jura) and this extended our stay in the “Washing Machine” far beyond the sensible. The boat continued to smash its way through endless monster waves with us unable and too scared to attempt moving below, and a blaring Coastguard pan-pan call (similar to a may-day) alarm went off on the instrument panel, with us both convinced we were finally going to sink! Thankfully it turned out to be a false alarm of a red flare sighting, not that we were in any position to do anything about it...

Finally, finally, finally things eased. The crew were battered, exhausted and ill, we were beyond caring, and Brian was not of this world. We only squelched out of our bags from the stinking sick covered floor as we were on the final run into Lamblash bay on Arran. I managed a few small things to eat and drink. I took plenty of extras to try and revive Brian once ashore where we changed into our dry running kit and already soaking water-proofs. It was heart warming to see so many Westies there at that time – Muffy, Dave, Captain John and of course Peter. Apologies if we were not just the pictures of happiness at that point. Our 5 minute kit-check timeout was over but we just didn’t care, we potted about until we were sort of ready then walked off, breaking into almost a jog, in the direction of Goatfell.

Not much to say about the final run except more misery, pain, suffering and yet more really nasty weather on the mountain. Brian fell heavily on the way down which I was sure was the end, but he picked himself up once more and we plodded on. Brian's heroic effort to keep one foot in front of the other on this last leg was the clincher. I'm not quite sure how he managed it with the state he was in - remarkable. We picked up the pace as we dropped back into Lamlash and our running finish-line, with Pete, Dave & Muffy tooting/cheering us on from Pete's car and then the unmistakable fog-horn of Big Al from the end of the street "WESTIES!". As we burst into the finish tent to see Captain Hamer stop the clock, I had only one thought - Elsie. Peter came into the tent and I hugged him for two people. Phew - our club were there in her place, Brian, Isobel, Al, John, Westies...I had a wee lump in my throat. It had been a tough weekend, but it looked like we would be Kings, just not confirmed yet...

Big Al waved us off in the rain, and our completely knackered but superb crew, with no more than a few hours sleep each in three days, shot us back across the Clyde to Troon in jig time, for me & Kate to row ashore and sprint up the pontoon with the Go-pro filming us to the finish line at the marina office. It was only there it was confirmed we were indeed King of the Bens and it was time to celebrate with our first drink since leaving Oban, everything still swaying and moving in our heads - who needs drams?!

Enormous thanks go to our crew for sticking it out and getting us safely round despite the weather, and tides, when many others had had enough and retired which is totally understandable; to Nick MacDonald and his team of exceptional marshals all along the route and islands; and to Brian for digging deeper than I thought was possible for those 18 miles.

As we all bid our farewells, one thing was not mentioned - next year...a bit too soon.

Manny

Ps - Thoughts can't help but be drawn to the possible situation of the 4 missing sailors in the Atlantic, making our story look rather tame and unimportant. Fingers crossed.

Posted by Manny Gorman on Thu 22 May 2014 | 11 comments