

SIPR 6 – 0 Capricorn

This year I decided to delay writing our log of SIPR 2018, to let the pain subside. A bit like giving birth, never again slowly turns into, first maybe then, wouldn't it be lovely.....

Capricorn has failed on 6 attempts to finish SIPR, each year has had its own reasons from lack of wind and restricted diaries to broken runners – who can forget the “intimate chafing”?

SIPR 2018 was going to be different, a new crew and new runners (same incompetent skipper). Diaries were cleared to make sure no repeat of the 1st mate announcing on the way to Salen that he had to be in Thurso at 0800 on Monday morning!!!

The sailing crew were carefully selected to include Ian, who is so laid back that wrestling with giant squid wouldn't bother him (there were no giant squid, but if there had been.....) and Spartacus (ex spy who likes to keep his identity secret) who has his RYA offshore ticket and has raced the Fastnet.

The runners, Phil and Vicky, although never previously having raced up mountains in the dark, are the fittest husband and wife team I know and no strangers to a challenge. They, amongst many other crazy events, have cycled the length of Ireland on a tandem!

Phil and Vicky took their training seriously. From several months prior to the event, they chased around the mountains of middle England, learning about navigation and hill running. They even caused a police incident whilst training in the dark with head torches on in a muddy field in Leicestershire. Imagine the scene when, whilst huddled over a map, apparently all alone, the air was suddenly filled with blue flashing lights as the police surrounded what they thought was a drug cartel – running in from all directions with dogs barking!!

The only oversight, now obvious thanks to hindsight, was that neither Phil or Vicky had ever been on a boat smaller than the Isle of Wight ferry.



Race Day

Like all the other teams, we gathered at Oban sailing club on the Friday morning, full of trepidation for what was to come. I of course had the burden of experience that I had chosen not to share – if I had, they might have all got on the train and gone home.

The first run around the hills of Oban went well, Phil and Vicky carefully pacing themselves into last but one place – a situation pleasing to the sailing crew as it made the melee of dinghies full of sweaty runners being run down by over enthusiastic skippers a spectator event.

The race to Salen was a mix of light winds, a hooley and light winds again. Capricorn performed particularly well as a result of Captain Bligh swearing loudly at the crew, arriving at 18:35, 6th in class. We even managed to fly our new spinnaker for the few minutes of the entire race that the wind wasn't on the nose.



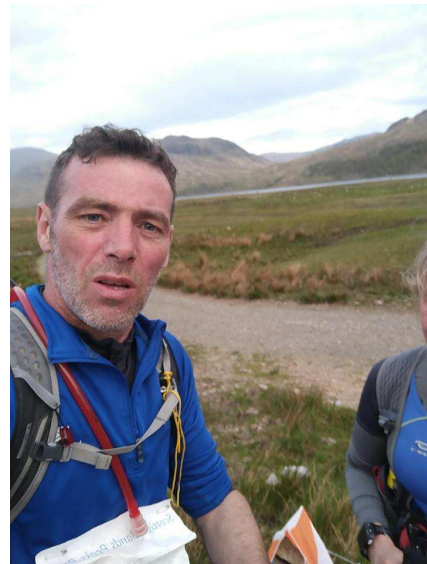
Ben More

Now, running along the road and the lower sections of the hill in daylight was not a problem, the Yellowbrick tracker showed our guys were making good progress, overtaking some of the more cautious runners. However, when darkness fell, a particularly dark night with wind, low cloud and rain, traversing steep ridges unable to see what lay below became quite a challenge. Fair play to our team, they kept on going, reaching each of the checkpoints in turn, but (and god do I sympathise), progress was slow meaning the whole night was spent on the hill.



I guess it might have been delirium resulting from the exhaustion, cold and wet, but Vicky realised something was wrong when Phil leapt across a burn and cried out that he had just stepped on a dead penguin!!

Now, I haven't seen everything David Attenborough has done, but I am fairly sure penguins are quite rare on Mull? On further inspection, the penguin also had a white woolly coat and horns?



Race Day one finally ended for our runners at 05:15 on Saturday morning, a gruelling 10 hours and 40 minutes on the hill – it was at this point I first spotted what I thought might be a drop in enthusiasm?

Salen to Jura

The sailing crew however, buoyed by having the entire fleet to chase down, drifted out into the Sound of Mull.

That sail down the sound was exhilarating, the wind filled in giving us an excellent beat to Lismore, made all the better by the view of most of the fleet becalmed ahead, watching us storming towards them.

We slipped out of the Sound and started our way down the Firth of Lorne having taken 6 other teams – happy days.

A great sail saw us slip through the tidal gate at the Sound of Luig just as the tide turned, some others choosing the long route round the West side of Jura. I'm not sure which was best, but by the time we reached the Corryreckan the tide and wind was firmly on the nose resulting in a very uncomfortable churn through the washing



machine, travelling at 7 knots through the boiling water but only 0.5 knots across the ground – occasionally.

Now, our runners, who to be honest, fully deserved to be resting in the penthouse suite of a 5* hotel, were finding conditions in the forepeak a little less than comfortable. They had at least worked out by this stage that putting your feet towards the pointy end is marginally more comfortable than the other way round.

On surfacing, they looked particularly green having gained very little sleep so far – I would liken their faces to those of two very sad Labradors who desperately just want this to stop ☹.

When we eventually broke free of the worst of the tide (note: head to the mainland coast as early as you can), we started to make progress South in an ever changeable wind – the crew can now put in and shake out a reef in double quick time.

At this point I decided to give up ownership of the wheel to Spartacus and try to catch 40 winks in the saloon. 9 minutes I got before I heard the instruction “CRASH TACK” following which chaos on deck ensued.

Bleary eyed, I joined the scene to find out we had picked up a lobster pot, left there by a friendly fisherman for our enjoyment. Sails down and an attempt to start the engine told us we were stuck fast with the pots mooring line around the rudder and the propeller fouled.

A very friendly Belfast coastguard told us he had scrambled the Islay lifeboat to come to our rescue and to await his further instruction. Sad and deflated, I woke the once again slumbering runners to explain our fate. Strangely, they didn't seem nearly as disappointed as we sailors did at what was apparently the 6th failure to complete SIPR?

On returning to the deck to await the lifeboat, it seemed that in the large swell, we had actually broken free!! Lifeboat stood down, sails back up, we were racing again – Labrador faces returned ☹.

The rest of the evening into nightfall was a continuation of slow progress in wind against tide with a few more reefs put in and shaken out for practice.

By the time we approached Craighouse, after midnight, our runners were quite unwell, focussing on rapid weight-loss over the side. It was clear at this point that another night on the hills followed by what promised to be similar or worse conditions the following day for a trip around the Mull just wasn't viable (or fun). A quick consensus and a message to the race marshals that Capricorn had had enough was followed by a large G&T (or two) and a much needed sleep for all.



We awoke on Sunday morning disappointed, but glad we had made the right decision. SIPR is not only incredibly challenging physically and mentally, there are so many other factors to take into account. To the teams that slogged it out to the end, well done guys, but I'm glad that under the circumstances we elected to sail back North from Jura to our mooring in Oban – we enjoyed a beer and a curry on the Oban pontoons whilst you were struggling to stay awake somewhere off Lamlash in miserable weather wishing it was over.

That said, can't wait for next year!!

