

## SIPR 2019

Our valiant runners' perspective is in the blue boxes.

Our SIPR campaign didn't necessarily get off to the finest of starts. It was the brainchild of Doug 1, for whom this was a bucket list item (it was nearly a bucket list item for me in 2013, although that bucket was looking likely to be kicked mid-SIPR, half way up Goat Fell). In 2013 we finished the course but declared ourselves disqualified on arrival in Lamlash on board *Sola* as we had used the engine to propel ourselves towards Arran in a fit of desperation with not a breath of wind.

I digress.

Sadly for Doug 1 (now recovered, I am pleased to say), he fell ill during the course of the preparation year and had to declare that his brother-in-law Phil, who shall henceforth be known as Superphil for reasons that will become clear, would have to find another running partner. Meantime I had lined up two very competent sailors in the shape of Tom and Stephen. When I say 'competent' I mean much more competent than the author. Doug 1, now our chairman, identified Doug 2 as a suitable replacement. Doug 2 had all the right credentials... a lifeboat coxswain (that would make three, probably four, more competent than the skipper) and a runner. Sadly, Doug 2 fell off the availability cliff with only weeks to go. At this point Buckie was identified as the third person to fill the second running slot. Entry fees paid... we were on.

Sometime previously I had made contact with Strathclyde Park Rowing Club and they agreed to sell me a set of carbon fibre sculls for the princely sum of £50, so we were equipped to deal with wind holes. Our sailors went into serious training to deal with such an eventuality – by ignoring the possibility until the moment was upon us.



With about two weeks to go a rallying email from yours truly met with silence from our runners. I had a sense that all was not well and asked our Chairman to sound the Board. With some alarm we discovered that Superphil had sustained an injury and was waiting to see how healing progressed. By this time I'd committed quite strongly to the project so went into overdrive to line up reserves. To cut a long story short, Superphil was not to be

underestimated and came good the week before the event with enough recovery made to 'guarantee a finish'.

Meanwhile our senior tactician Tom was busy surfing the internet at work and lining up a series of weather forecasts. Which model should we be using? PWE? PWG? EFS? ECMWF? Actually, it mattered not a jot - they were all equally gloomy about our prospects for decent wind and we were becoming increasingly nervous about actually having to use the sculls. Tom had an inspired thought... if there was no wind at Salen and the tidal gate at Duart Point was shut, could we make SIPR history by being (perhaps) the first boat to go west-about Mull to find wind and give our Yellow Brick tracker fans something to scratch their heads over?



With detailed food planning complete (everyone was to bring a curry of roughly the same consistency to ensure dietary variety) Doug 1 and I set off for a brief Chairman's delivery cruise from Ardfert to Oban. Admiring the new beacon in Cuan Sound we sailed and motored to Puilladobhain to test the practice chanters in preparation for our entry to the Bosun's Whistle competition in Oban Bay on Friday. We also practised meal preparation skills by eating curry.



Advanced preparations over we set out for the pontoons in Oban to pick up the team, enjoy an evening together and deposit the Chairman on shore so he could meet us again on Arran. But I'm getting ahead of myself. At this point we had our first encounter with Superphil and Buckie. After enthusiastic introductions Buckie surprised us slightly with the revelation that he 'is not really a runner - I don't enjoy it'. If we had known then what we know now (that Buckie is the supreme master of modesty and understatement) then I might not have been quite so surprised!



Our team preparations were deep and rigorous on Thursday evening. This involved heading to Wetherspoon's and eating... curry, followed by Olympic snoring. Allegedly. I can't confirm this as I slept through the lot.

### **Meeting Sarah**

As the running element of this adventure, neither 'Buckie' nor I had ever met the crew before, so the Thursday night before the big event was something of a 'blind date'; what better way then than to meet at a local Oban delicatessen known as 'Wetherspoons'. Having consulted our pocket 'Nutrition for Extreme Athletes,' we were intrigued to find that fortified Belgian lager and extra, extra hot tandoori chicken curry was not in fact shown on the list of 'Recommended Diets' for the long distance runner. Still, what's 24 miles when you've had a good curry and a cracking evening the night before! Sure enough, close to midnight, we retired to our cabins on the sloe black, slow, black, crow black, fishing boat-bobbing sea (DT), more 'Love Boat' than 'Mutiny on the Bounty'...with the sound of Tandoori seals and Peshwari otters barking through the night. Sic.

Friday morning saw, well, pretty much the same approach to preparation as Thursday's regime. Hugh and Superphil headed to the race briefing and listened to the words of wisdom.

*"The race is not sailed under racing rules so adhere to ColRegs."*

*"Use your engine if you're in danger of hitting another boat."*

Those words would later echo around Oban Bay!

Runners ashore and ready, Hugh and Tom picked up a mooring and Hugh made a play for the Bosun's Whistle. As there were no other pipers, it would be a travesty if we didn't get it! Stranger things have happened where my piping is concerned.



## Sightseeing In Oban

It's testament to the conviviality of the competitors that the start of the running loop in Oban is more akin to swallows chatting on a line than the silence beckoning a desperate canter. Everyone takes their 'place' in the line-up, according to how the runners themselves think they will perform; it's an intriguing lesson in self-assessment, given there's so many new faces about. Buckie and I slot quietly into the top third, no fireworks, just steady away. We are later greeted by 'Popeye' Stephen Q on quayside with the dinghy, who then demonstrates a remarkable rpm on the oars (think more 'Mississippi steamer' than 'Cambridge punt'). We're not sure who originally invented the sport or the technique of rowing... but one has to question any activity performed facing backwards and leaning forwards whilst simultaneously avoiding being rammed. Anyway, Stephen admirably docked with the mother ship and off we sped to Mull.

At the end of the race Stephen rowed out valiantly with Buckie and Superphil on board and we managed a decent pick-up and start. We suffered a minor T-boning by another boat, whose skipper seemed unconcerned to have seen me, terrified, jumping up from the helm and fending him off with only minor damage sustained to the GPS antenna and the outboard. I guess adrenaline was flowing and he had forgotten the bit about the engine. Or us being in the water. Lesson learned – we should both have used our engines to get out of a pickle.



Photo credit: Trevor James

A CalMac ferry offered up five blasts to a WAFI, presumably in an expression of sheer joy for the number of boats in Oban Bay. Luckily the boat he was happiest to see was not taking part in SIPR, so no-one fell foul of Alastair Pugh's declaration that anyone receiving five toots from CalMac would face instant disqualification.

We enjoyed a fairly swift sail to Salen avoiding a wind hole south of us, witnessing another CalMac ferry captain celebrating with another five blasts at Lismore Light - again, not a SIPR boat so the fleet escaped with honour intact. Arriving 11th overall and 1st in class,

Stephen took the runners ashore in what had become a reasonable wind and they started the run up to the top of Ben More and back. It was a great effort: 5h 1m

### **Mull Reckoning**

Now Buckie IS an athlete, in spite of what he might tell you. But two weeks of mountain biking in the US and no running whatsoever in the last few months probably sits close to extra hot Tandoori chicken curry as the ultimate in poor preparation for running 24 miles on Mull. It follows that I was never quite sure whether the permanent sweat on Buckie's brow was exertion or distress; probably a bit of both, to be fair. I had also 'undersold' my pre-race ambitions to Buckie as for a finishing place in the SIPR, enticing Buckie to join the team with a declaration that the event would be far more 'sandwiches on the summit' than 'gels on the go.' It was, of course, no such thing. Still, I thoroughly enjoyed the views from the summit whilst Buckie was allowed to enjoy just the summit, well momentarily. At 8.30pm in the middle of May, atop Ben More on a clear evening with the islands, the sea and the reflections below... there's not too much else to want for. This race, these places, these people around us – are very special privileges. We both acknowledged this, atop Ben More and throughout the weekend.

In addition to his self-deprecation, Buckie has deep wells of reserve and it is testament to his Team spirit that he struck out on the return to Salen at such a fair lick, keen to keep Team *Sarah* in the race.



Now for the start of the hard bit. With the tide in our favour we reckoned we could escape Duart Point and head south for Fladda. Slightly reluctantly we abandoned the west-about Mull route and let down our Yellow Brick fans. *Sarah* fairly flew down the Sound of Mull. The most amusing conversation went something like this:

*Tom: Is that a rock ahead on the plotter?*

*Stephen: Yes*

*Tom: Is it safe?*

*Stephen: I don't know. I can't find my reading glasses. It's either 5m deep or it dries 0.5m.*

*Tom: Which one?*

*Stephen: It dries.*

*Hugh: Isn't that the rock that doesn't exist?*

*Tom: Eh?*

*Hugh: It might be the one Bob Bradfield surveyed and found didn't exist.*

*Tom (with about 15 seconds to go before impact): Is a F6 in the dark the time to find out?*

*Hugh: Probably not.*

*All: TACKING!*

Sometime in the middle of Fladda with calmer winds we hoisted the kite and kept it flying all the way to Craighouse, where Stephen rowed Superphil and Buckie ashore (5h 0m). Tom and I anchored and Stephen was beginning to suspect that the distances out we were anchoring were because Tom and I thought he needed to improve his upper body strength. On arrival back on *Sarah* he discovered Tom and me getting stuck into a breakfast beer. As Tom pointed out, the SIPR removes the need for the sun to be over the yardarm and instead focuses you on 'departure' and 'arrival'. Determined to trump the breakfast beer, Stephen unwrapped the rather bulky parcel he was clutching. Oh look - a half case of Lussa Gin!



## Pinning Mist to Clouds on Jura

If you've ever run long distances consecutively, you'll know that not until you take your first few steps again do you really know whether you can actually walk, let alone run, anywhere. Once moving, then there's a period of reckoning as you tick off the list of ailments...sore left foot, sore right knee, inflamed ITB, stiff lower back and so it goes on. Eventually these wear off, replaced by new pains until the mind begins to ignore everything and you can once again focus on the scenery, in theory.

We arrived on Jura with the Paps lost in mist, a light rain, strengthening summit winds and with a compass and map stuck to cold hands throughout. What hills though! Imagine the Almighty dropping handfuls of granite sugar cubes down on earth until they form three perfectly cylindrical cones. Then add some finer granular sugar and on the Eighth Day, God had made Jura. And he saw that it was good, very good!

"100 metres directly East," shouted some true SIPR gents, leading us off the cold and wet final summit across boulders until there in front of us lay a 1000ft pathway of scree down to the river. It's the kindness of strangers in the SIPR which makes it so memorable and special.

It's a kindness that also seems to pervade many in the race, and not least on *Sarah*. Popeye Stephen rowed us back from Craighouse, and as *Sarah* took sail for Arran, Buckie and I rummaged in our bags for dry clothes. It was there that we soon discovered two bottles of Jura's famous Lussa Gin, distilled using the special botanics of the island and bought for us so generously by our Popeye. Speechless. Your kindness is your invisible tattoo, Mr Q.

Superphil and Buckie managed to put in a superb run (23rd) and we reckoned that it would be a bit squeaky for the tide at the Mull of Kintyre. Undeterred, we hoisted the kite where it would remain for 17 hours. We regaled the runners with stories about the reputation of the Mull of Kintyre but in the event it was almost flat clam, although we did try to liven things up by identifying the only overfalls and ensuring that we gybed the spinnaker at exactly the point we hit them. After a dram.



It was an uneventful passage round the outside of Sanda to avoid any potential for adverse tides and I went below for a sleep at 2am. When I woke at 4am we were in almost exactly the same place off the east of Arran. Time to break the seal on the sculls and row into Lamlash, where we deposited the dinghy mid-bay and let them take the long row while Tom and I continued to drift to the pier in case we had broken any rules by dumping them unceremoniously over the side so far out. We hadn't, so once more we found a mooring a long way out and enjoyed our arrival (17th, 4th in class). Excitement was building as it felt like we were in serious danger of actually finishing the race.

### **Arriba, Arriba Arran**

It was a treat to be met by Doug 1 half way up Goat Fell, wherein a sip of coffee and a dram of whisky provided a relatively legal kick-start (disqualification alert for outside assistance perhaps....but we'll contest the performance enhancing features of whisky with you in court, as required!).

Now Buckie clearly knows how to pace himself. The curly haired lad took Arran in his stride and descended off Goat Fell like there was a new boss in town. "Stuff your bloody sandwiches, Phil" was the feeling I got!

With a well-meaning "Good shot," we saluted a golfer on our return leg across the Arran Links Golf Course, as he struck the ball into the air, god knows where. We 'sped' to Lamlash, arriving at the jetty, only to be met by the gentle lapping of the water, our trusty Popeye dinghyman still aboard *Sarah*, drinking, we can only presume from the empty pinot bottles we later found. Once alerted, a tsunami of rowing bought Stephen ashore to collect us and we feigned desperation and disappointment at having been held up (really, it was just a few minutes), simply happy that our work was now done.



The Chairman's photo on Arran



Buckie and Superphil arrived back at the boat ahead of their estimate (4h 7m) having liaised with our Chairman half way up Goat Fell (photo above) and so we set off for Troon with a zephyr breeze and lots of tactical calling by Stephen and Tom. Kite up once more, we were finally stranded in a wind hole and simultaneously attacked by a squadron of mini mayflies, which covered our sails, died, and fell on our heads. Morale hit a bit of a low point as we had also re-deployed the sculls and were taking 10 minute punishment shifts. Superphil and Tom appeared to be significantly more competitive than the rest of us. I tried to improve the atmosphere by digging out 'Row, row, row your boat' on the stereo. I managed to avoid being punched only by ducking.



Photo credit: [tbc]

Superphil praying for the arrival of a dinghy in Lamlash...



### **When Runners Are Useful On Board**

Let's face it, us runners are usually just skinnymalinkies on board, minor ballast at best, needy cargo at worst... until that is, the wind dies completely and the ocean lies still. Thus we found that our work was not yet done after all, and for an hour or so, we like to think we became of some use, helping the crew to row back to Troon across the glassy sea. Somehow I knew that the rope that tied my oar to the rigging would snap sooner or later...and sure enough, I flew backwards onto something else I don't know the name of. All I remember was that it was big and shiny. That's boats for you!

Eventually we arrived in Troon, having managed 19th overall and 5th in class on the sail, giving us a combined running and sailing combination of 18th overall and 5th in class - a top half finish. Certificates in hand we were a combination of exhausted and delighted, with the only challenges remaining being to get the dead, squashed mayflies off the mainsail and get the boat back to Ardfarn! But that's another story.



Tom, Hugh, Stephen, Superphil, Buckie

### **When Three and Two Make One**

The best of adventures bring people together. The SIPR on *Sarah* for Buckie and I was a time of listening to hilarious stories, sharing good 'craic,' and looking after and out for one another.

Ultimately we salute the absent but never forgotten Doug 1 for being The Alchemist – assembling a merry band of men who got on like a house on fire. To Tom and Stephen – your skill and kindness so evident both on the surface and deep down, like the bobbing sea itself. To Buckie, you dog! You snarl and you bark but ultimately you end up running in front like a true leader of the pack, always fun and always memorable. 'He'll never run the SIPR again', until the next time he does!

And finally to our Skip – Hugh, who trusted his runners with a night on the beers and curry in Oban, and then looked after us like his sails, furling us below deck, wrapping his proverbial arms around us and making sure we were cared for. Thank you Crew.

And that's the magic of how five become one. Team *Sarah*. SIPR 2019

A huge thank you to all the organisers, volunteers and participants for a great adventure.