

Scottish Islands Peaks Race (It's mostly pictures so not that long to read, promise!)

It's the sailing and running race! This is an absolutely outstanding event for so many reasons which I'll try to explain, but everything written below can only be an under-exaggeration of how wonderful a weekend this is 😊

The Race: 160 miles of sailing and 60 miles of hill running around the west coast of Scotland. Specifically:

A short run in Oban to start, followed by a Le Mans style paddling dash to the boats.

Dodge the passenger ferries sailing to Mull.

Run a billion miles of flat road and track then go up Ben More.

Sail close to or through the Corryvreckan whirlpool to Jura.

Ruin our shoes on The Paps of Jura.

Sail around the Mull of Kintyre to Arran.

Twice climb the enormous Prospect Hill (and once up Goat Fell) on Arran.

Sail to Troon for a mad sprinting kayak and run finish.



The Team: We were a 3 sailors and 2 runners team, like the majority. Some teams were all-rounders where each person has to do at least one big island run, and there were 4 youth teams who have to send 2 16-17 year-olds onto each of their slightly modified island running routes. We had:

Boat Elixir of Lorn – 5th fastest boat last year despite being smaller than the rest of the top 10. We have a relative advantage in the light winds or when rowing. But when the wind blows we get bounced around more and start to struggle.

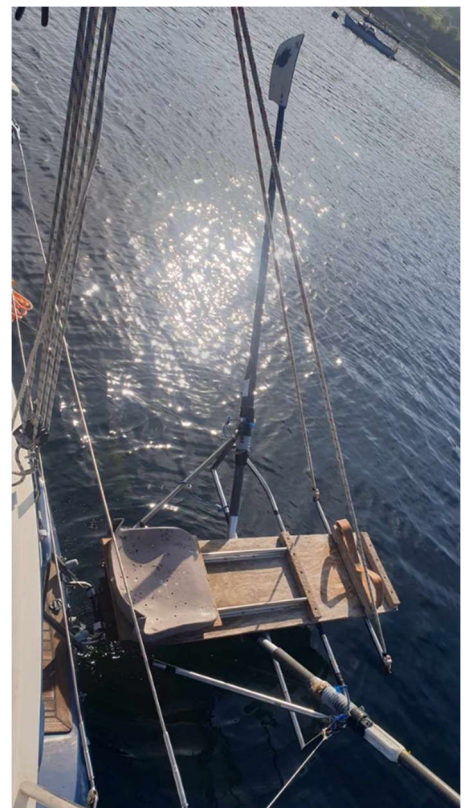
Skipper Andy – Back for his 3rd race having masterminded victories in class 3 (I don't know what this means either) the past 2 years, but we were promoted to class 2 this year as punishment for being good or something? He had spent the previous week rigging up a rowing machine system!

Sailor Mark – a veteran of many an Islands race and provider of extremely civilised conversation about the contents of his first aid kit. Absolute powerhouse rower!

Sailor James – Andy's brother, has raced before so knows what he's letting himself in for! First time I met him was during the frantic boat boarding operation! He got us on efficiently and first impressions mean a lot!

Runner Joe – From Northumberland Fell Runners and Muckle Cycle Club. Last time we were a well matched pair but both felt like we under performed a bit. Joe spends all of his time while not running (and half of it while running) making videos and posting on social media.

Runner me – I had good performances at Edale Skyline and Manx Mountain Marathon in March. But in April on a long day out in the Lakes with Joe, I had to limp off the hill and then DNF London Marathon the week after. Recovery was going well since then, so I know I'm fit ish but can my knee survive???

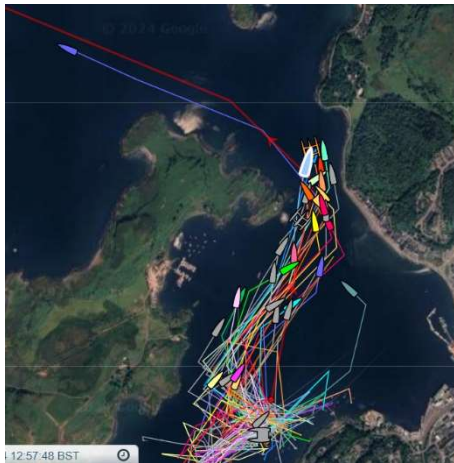


Oban – Arrival, Kit Check and The Start

Last year the build up was the first time in a while I felt properly scared of a race. The combination of a harder running challenge than I'd ever done, the total unknown of how I'd cope on a wee boat at sea, and the knowledge that I'd be letting the whole team down if I couldn't handle either of those was pretty intimidating. However when arriving in Oban I found out that Joe and all the other debutants were feeling exactly the same, which somehow made things better. This year those emotions were dialled down a bit, we'll manage to get through somehow!

Oban Yacht Club (right) is a wonderfully low-key venue for such a massive race 😊 There is a very extensive kit check, we all remembered our pencil and paper and spare torch batteries.

This 4 mile run is primarily designed to stagger the boats' start. This was a chance to trash talk some of our opponents! Joe unfortunately forgot the drawing pins to stick in team Tangaroa's inflatable kayak, while team Clockwork are still banging on about which class our boat is in, as they have been for the past year.



Unusually there was some real drama in Oban that could be race – deciding. The final descent is fairly well hidden. A group of teams in about 5-10th place missed the turn, including Clockwork who were 'following orienteers'. Joe and I giggled our way to an unexpected 5th place. As we paddled out to Elixir of Lorn, Tangaroa seemed to be going the wrong way, did their runners and sailors get lost too? Joe and I scrambled out of the kayak and we were sailing!

Left is a snapshot of the race tracker, as the boats were leaving Oban Harbour. We are the highlighted sky blue boat, Tangaroa are the dark blue boat with a massive lead, the grey boats did not complete the race but in most cases used their motor and still completed the runs.

Sail to Mull – We're not going to win, let's have some fun 😊

Good news – we got out of Oban harbour in 2nd place thanks to an efficient pickup and some skillful navigation of the gentle winds and busy traffic!

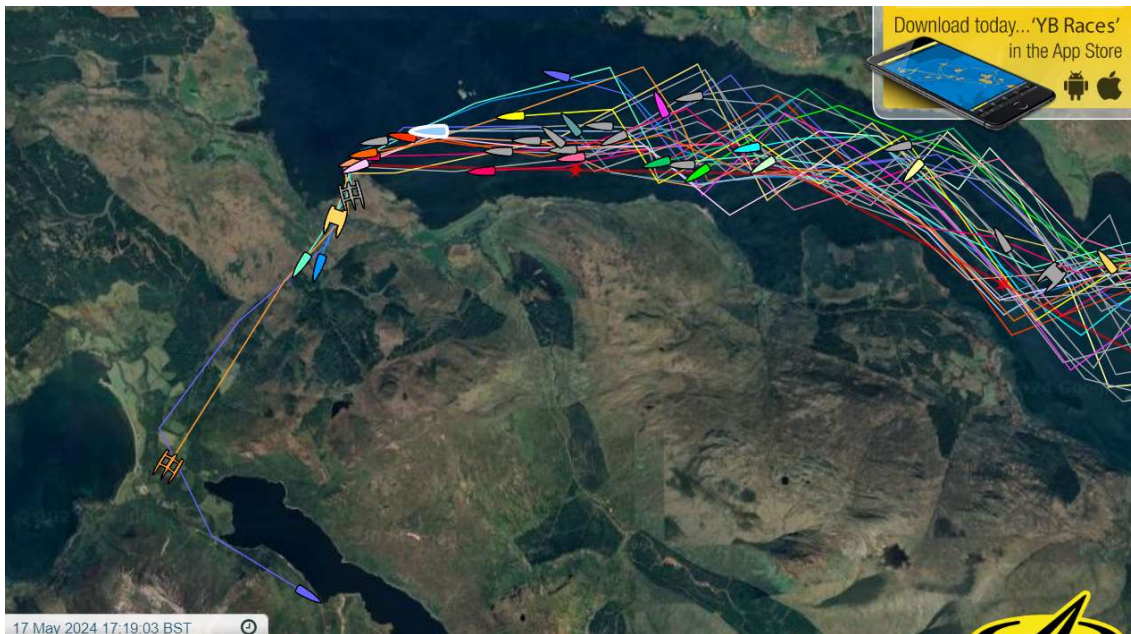
Bad news – all of us are already 15 mins or more behind Tangaroa, the winners of the past 2 races. They did some sailing magic and found some wind going an unusual route out of the harbour.



*(Right to Left)
Sundance of Lorn,
Pippa, Elixir of Lorn,
Superstition,
Clockwork,
Opportune and the
tip of Excalibur
leaving Oban
Harbour.*

The first deployment of the rowing machine saw Mark power us high up the field. The wind did blow before too long though, which brought mixed emotions since Mark could rest, but bigger boats overtook us. As someone who knows little about sailing I really enjoy this stage of the race when lots of boats are racing close together. Some decide to sail close to the Mull side of the sea, some stay by the mainland. I don't know why but it's great to be a part of!

Tide times can have a massive impact on the race, especially if there's not much wind. Skipper Andy informs us that the tide will halt all boats at Lismore until 3am on the way from Mull to Jura unless the wind stays as it is (it's forecast to drop). So will everyone catch Tangaroo? Does this Mull run even matter? We go ashore in 13th place I think, tracker snapshot below, but there are no large gaps except right at the front of the race. Tangaroo still have a big lead, Excalibur (a multi-hulled boat, apparently that's cheating) have opened a gap on the rest.



Ben More – Tactical Genius

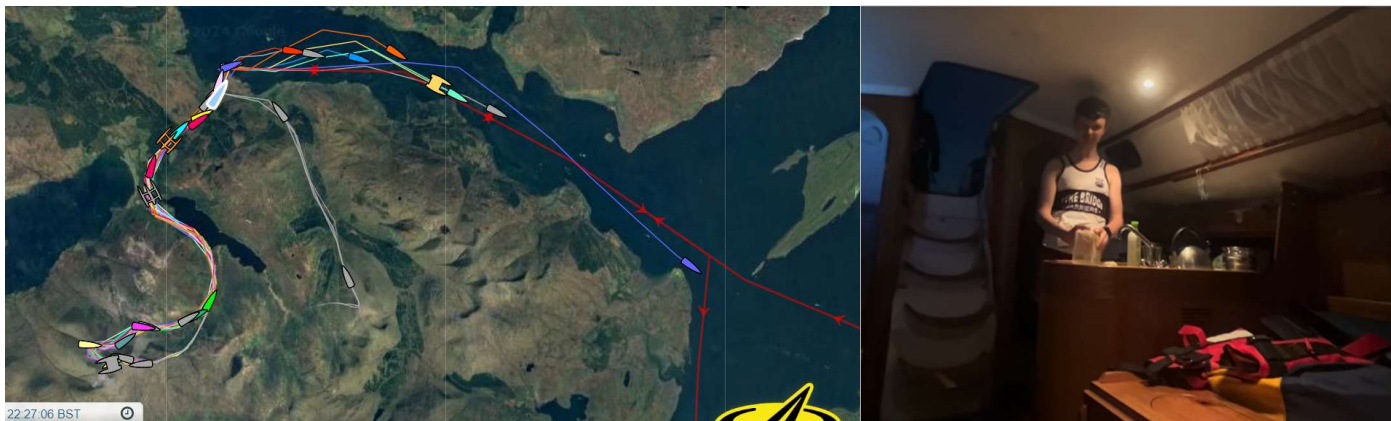
We completed the Mull kit check with 1 of the 5 allocated minutes to spare. This offered the rare sensation of having some time where we weren't racing – what should we do with our 60 second holiday? It was unusually hot for Mull, about 20 degrees at sea level as we started. We decided to set off a bit faster than last year but nothing ridiculous, we covered the 8 mile run to the base of the hill in just over an hour, overtaking youth team Luskentyre in the process. Superstition were in sight for much longer than expected, last year they led the race off Mull and came zooming past us on Jura, so were they less strong this year or were we going too fast? I have a big drink and fill my bottle in the stream, Joe does not. Then up the hill which had truly horrible views as you can see:



We pass Pteam Ptarmigan with their recent Barkley Marathons finisher who didn't want any Hobnobs, Bequia with their pedallo, Excalibur and Stan. All is going marvelously as we hit the summit in a faster time than last year 😊

Team Meridian flew past us on our first taste of a scree descent. Several teams including us had some checkpoint finding issues on the way down but we got there eventually. Team Sundance of Lorn, on a very high line that might be worth trying next year, came flying past just before rejoining the track. I tried to push on, but Joe very wisely observed that the wind had dropped so there was no rush (he definitely wasn't massively dehydrated). Bequia pedalled past and Storm Free stormed through, but we got back to the sea before it was too dark to find our boat. 12 minutes slower than last year but we're in the same position as we started and Joe's suffering should be temporary, nothing that drinking loads of water and eating loads of Hulla Hoops can't fix!

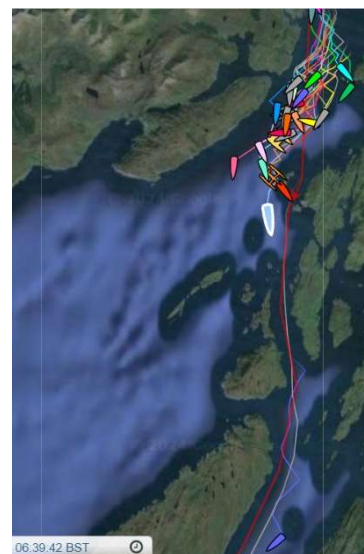
Tangaroa are nearly at the Lismore Junction, Lismore is the island on the right side of the snapshot below, will they and everyone get halted there? Washing dishes action shot also pictured (washing up of me also happened, honest!)



Sail to Jura – Lazarus of Lorn

It was a gentle night wind wise which allowed for a good sleep 😊 Our heroic sailors caught up with others at Lismore then found a magic way to get through, I awoke very confused to find us in 2nd overall! Tangaroa also got through so were now even further ahead. It was a misty morning (below) so very difficult to spot where any patches of wind were, we dropped anchor for an hour to stop the tide sending us backwards. All very frustrating for the sailors but great news for running recovery time! Other teams were doing likewise, did any teams fall asleep???

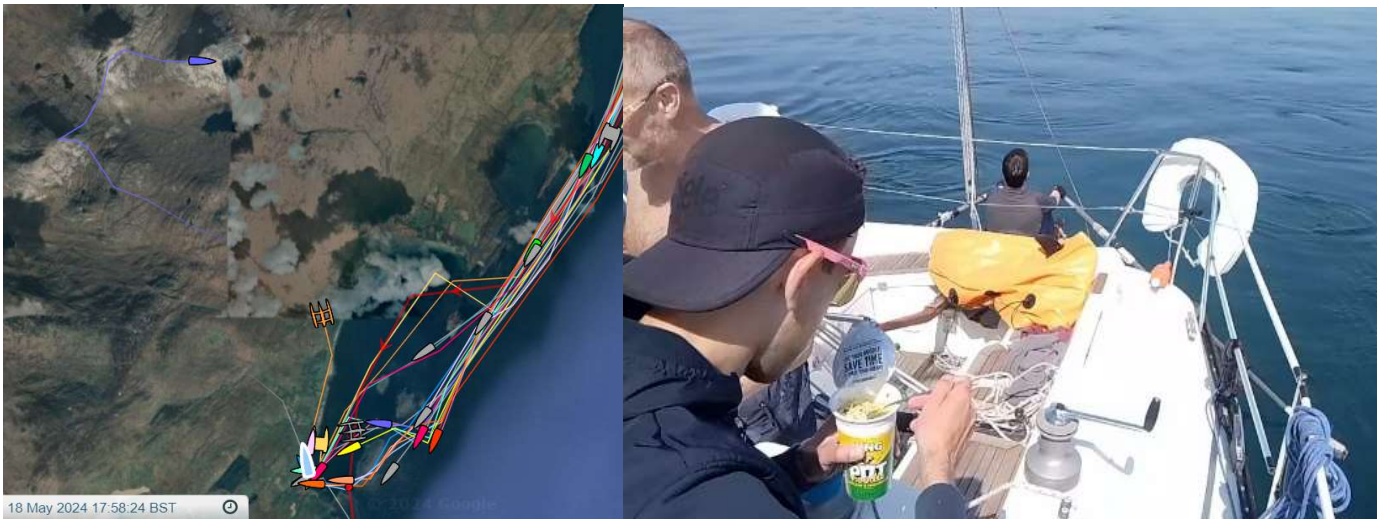
Some boats timed it well to sail through the Gulf of Corryvreckan on the north coast of Jura, which at certain times in the tidal cycle becomes the 3rd largest whirlpool in the world! There are Spanish Armada ships and German U-Boats down there, but not Pippa, Bequia or Storm Free! Jura is where George Orwell wrote 1984, he nearly drowned in the whirlpool in 1947. His one-legged brother-in-law, Bill Dunn, was the first person to swim the Gulf. No such antics were on show today though! The wind picked up as the Paps come into view. We lose a few places to big fast boats, but the sheltered Craighouse bay forces everyone to get the oars out and Mark powered us past Pippa and Storm Free. Coming ashore, Tangaroa are on the last Pap, Excalibur are 2 miles ahead, we are 6th place in a tightly packed group (or 4th if you apply the 'multi-hulled boats only count when they're behind you' rule).



Lots to see here!

Race situation as we land on Jura.

James working hard on the oars as Joe fuels up like a pro!



Paps of Jura – Lazarus Part Two

A lovely sociable group of Pippa, Clockwork, Storm Free and ourselves set off on the (thankfully much shorter) road and track section. We all take different lines to the base of Pap 1, ours seemed decent, no unnecessary climbing and by Jura standards pretty good underfoot 😊 On the STEEP climb to the summit we were ahead of all those teams, excellent route choice! We catch Bequia and Excalibur, but Opportune and Aqua Marine come flying past. Again it seems to be going well early on, but there is still a lot of hard running to do, can we hold it together this time?

Starting the first descent lets you know why Jura has such a fearsome reputation! It's very steep with loose rocks everywhere. There are some grassy lines and runnable bits of scree so descending well is all about finding those. I'm still far from mastering that kind of descent, I was holding up Joe a bit, but an improvement on last year for sure. Pippa overtake us but we find the next checkpoint straight away which didn't happen last time so all is going well.

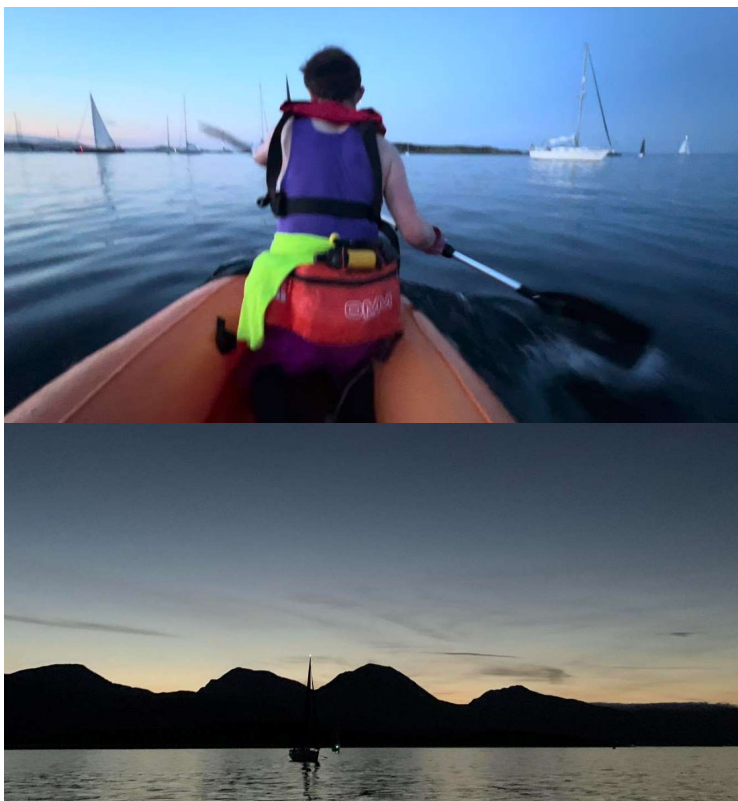


Onto the next STEEP climb and we're both staying strong, Pippa are still ahead but we're holding off everyone else. The cloud inversions are just incredible on the occasions where it's safe to look up. Descending Pap 2 we found a good line this year, team Meridian come flying past but we're still holding off lots of fast boats. Up Pap 3 and now Joe is starting to drop me on the STEEP climbs, he's recovered well and in hindsight I was probably not eating and drinking enough – it's hard when every step is precarious!

We take a different route down this year, reversing our climbing route for a few hundred yards then it was grass all the way down. This is a reliable route and would be a good choice in poor visibility or at night, but judging from others there are direct routes through the scree that seem to work slightly better. Only a couple of minutes lost though. We saw Clockwork close to the summit, unfortunately Kai was asking if we had painkillers which is not a nice situation to be in, he got to the finish in one piece though without losing too much time. Bequia and Storm Free nowhere to be seen, they beat us on Mull so it was definitely a solid performance. On flatter but still muddy ground I got several gels and loads of water down me and felt much better.

We managed to lose one of the tags you leave at the checkpoints, so we actually used our pencil and paper! 3 Arch Bridge got a note saying 'Elixir Woz Ere!' Hopefully that is acceptable. Joe was still flying to complete a spectacular resurrection, we make pretty light work of the road section back to the boat and we are sailing, 6th on the water so once again no overall gain or loss. Just over 4 hours, about 50 minutes faster than last year!

Leaving Jura: Opportune in 2nd, then Aqua Marine, Meridian, Pippa, Elixir of Lorn, eXhibitionist, Superstition, Storm Free, Bequia, Clockwork, Excalibur and Ptarmigan. The leading grey boat on the youth course is Luskentyre.



Sail to Arran – More night time drama

Leaving Jura was spectacular, in the fading light the silhouette of the Paps dominates the view. There are shooting stars shining on them that are the headtorches of the runners. It's very calm so the oars are back out. Race patterns are becoming established now; James powers us past Pippa and Meridian, then Excalibur pass us. Another crucial tidal change is coming around the Mull of Kintyre. As I go to bed, Tangaroa are nearly there already, Opportune have a good lead over us and have found some wind, we'll need that to avoid another anchor drop...

While Joe and I are having our desperately needed beauty sleep, Bequia do some pedallo saily magic to go way past us. Clockwork and Storm Free also catch up as the wind appears again. It's very tight for time going round the Mull of Kintyre, rough seas bounce us around and wake us up, but all of our stomachs stay strong! Opportune, Aqua Marine and Excalibur beat the tide. Who else can? Bequia pedallo through, Clockwork and Storm Free power through, and with some frantic rowing Broorach (the leading all-rounders team) and us make it round just as the current starts to switch. Pippa, Superstition and eXhibitionist are only a few hundred meters behind but get stuck for hours. It was tiring work for Mark!



I awoke to find that George Orwell's one-legged brother-in-law had paid us a visit! How else could a single unfamiliar trainer get left outside my wee bunk? Then follows a steady journey to Arran, occasional bits of wind, occasional rowing. Tangaroa leave Lamlash before we can even see it. Excalibur and Opportune now have a big lead over us. But with more saily magic and powerful rowing we make land in 4th overall with a narrow lead over Clockwork and Bequia. They are both faster boats if the wind picks up, and have good runners so we better get a move on!



Arriving at Arran – Opportune in 2nd, then Excalibur, Clockwork, Elixir of Lorn, Bequia, Storm Free and Broorach. Andy and James do some sailing things.



Arran – A chance to see people!

As we set off, Opportune are nearly at Goat Fell Summit, so we won't catch them. Excalibur are 5 miles ahead. We've closed gaps on them before but this is a big one. Of more immediate concern are Clockwork and Bequia just behind. During kit check Clockwork come ashore, unfortunately Kai has not recovered from Jura. Doug Byatt heroically steps up to run Goat Fell, having not run at all since February. Unfortunately he's not quite up to Kai's standards but defended their position admirably for a 7th place finish, it would have been great to have a head to head race, hopefully next year 😊. Bequia have no such problems though and remain a threat.

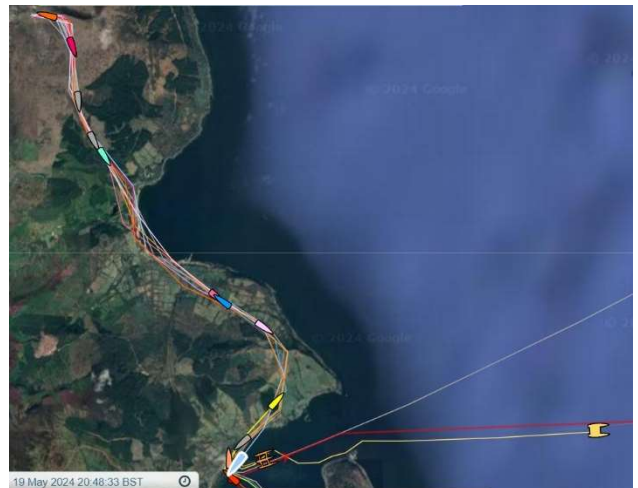


Joe and I set a strong pace from the off, we say hello to the retired HMSTC Pochard team completing their run. The out and back nature of the route means you usually know how other teams are getting on. We somehow don't see Opportune on their way back, we must have taken different routes through Brodick. This caused much confusion, have they somehow got lost? Were their trackers broken? We reach the summit and it's a glorious clear view this year, no time to stop and admire though!

Descending now, the key question is how far down will we get before seeing Bequia. Good news, it took 5 minutes of descending so that means maybe a 15 minute lead, we're giving Andy, Mark and James a chance to beat them on the water. It's an emotional descent as we realise that this wonderful race will all be over soon.

On the short climb over Prospect Hill towards the harbour the emotions change to something like 'OOOWWWWWW MY LEGS'. There's still no sign of Excalibur, given how fast their boat is that 3rd place doesn't look likely. We catch youth team Luskenytre and high-five Pippa as they start their run. Once again we finish running in the same position as we left, why have we even bothered leaving the boat all weekend? That's the hard work done right?

The tracker is confusing on the out and back course with retired boats completing runs! Tangaroa are in the pub in Troon, then Opportune, Excalibur, Elixir of Lorn, Bequia, Storm Free, Clockwork and Boorach have reached the summit.





Sail to Troon

Wrong! Now that Joe and I have nothing to conserve energy for we get 'invited' to contribute to the rowing effort by using our kayak paddles off the side of the boat. It is about the last thing I want to do after all the exertion of the weekend, but Andy, Mark and James have done loads of rowing all day and night so if we can make the boat go slightly faster then it's worth it, that pedallo isn't too far behind! (Just above my head)

After a couple of miles we thankfully pick up some wind, but so do Bequia! The gap should be enough but we've seen stranger things happen on the water. We prepare for the finish as if it's going to be a sprint. Boats can enter the outer harbour at Troon, then Joe and I will get dropped off in the kayak, we paddle to the inner harbour, tie up the kayak and run to the sailing club reception. Fortunately our super sailors got us there with enough of a gap not to worry, but one year we will get a sprint so it's worth preparing for! The end comes just after midnight and we can have a proper shower 😊 (many many baby wipes were harmed in the making of this adventure).

4th overall is well beyond expectations for a wee boat with some average runners! Absolutely outstanding sailing and rowing effort got us into such a high position, then our running was significantly better than last year despite issues on Mull. More importantly it was a spectacular adventure with great friends.

The race aims 'to encourage sailors to appreciate fell running, for runners to appreciate sailing and for both to enjoy what must be some of the best sailing and hill running in the world; to help to build the self-confidence of the youngsters sailing in the Youth Teams; to raise funds for various good causes; but the main objective is to provide a challenging experience to sailors and runners who may be too busy to devote weeks to sailing the Atlantic or trekking in Tibet but who still relish overcoming a challenge which is well beyond those normally encountered in our modern well insulated lives'. We certainly achieved that 😊

Pos	Name	Time	
1	Tangaroa	2d 6h 9m 46s	Overall Winner; Class 2 Winner
2	Excalibur III	2d 11h 17m 10s	Class 1 Winner
3	Opportune	2d 11h 21m 42s	
4	Elixir of Lorn	2d 12h 2m 37s	The winner is whoever has the most fun!
5	Bequia	2d 12h 23m 18s	
6	Storm Free	2d 12h 53m 18s	Class 3 Winner
7	Clockwork	2d 13h 4m 14s	
8	Aqua Marine	2d 13h 34m 43s	
9	Boorach	2d 14h 45m 22s	All-Rounders Winner
10	Pippa VI	2d 15h 5m 53s	Elsbeth Scott Trophy for Mixed Pairs
11	eXhibitionist	2d 15h 45m 6s	
12	Superstition	2d 15h 57m 55s	
13	Ptarmigan	2d 16h 33m 36s	
14	Time and Motion	2d 18h 7m 22s	
15	Meridian	2d 19h 22m 54s	
16	Ghillie	2d 19h 32m 25s	
17	Sundance of Lorn	2d 19h 57m 43s	Kings of the Bens; Oban Slip Trophy
18	Dipper	2d 20h 14m 46s	
19	Marisca	2d 20h 16m 43s	Molls of Kintyre
20	Pintail	2d 20h 27m 58s	Services Teams Winner
21	Pickle	2d 22h 4m 26s	
22	Tilty Too	3d 1h 6m 27s	
23	Wildfire	3d 2h 50m 50s	
	Kittiwake		Junior Kings of the Bens

