

## PEAKY BLUNDERS REPORT – SCOTTISH ISLANDS PEAKS RACE....

(We all helped write this report)

I had skippered the SIPR once before and fancied another go. I initially asked my previous crew, Cardinal Mark and Apparent Wind Allan, whom, strangely, had a range of exotic excuses for not being available. Also, one of the previous runners, Brisk Brendan, was, on the face of it, keen, but having timed his MSC course and baby daughter perfectly, was also otherwise indisposed. Only Meteoric Matt remained ready and willing and also undertook to search the dark web for an additional runner, and recruited Rapid Ross as the second runner. Hmm!, what to do? I know, I'll trick a couple of Irish sailor men into taking part. As it turned out, I ended up with two obvious Irish and two closet Irish.

The story of team Peaky Blunders 2025 began at least a year ago when skipper Guy Newson mentioned the race to fellow Fireball sailors Frank Miller and Ed Butler. The clincher conversation took place at Geelong in Australia during the Fireball World Championships in 2024 when the pair agreed to sign up with Guy for the 2025 event. Guy then recruited hill runner Matt Williamson who had done the race with him in 2022. Matt promptly persuaded fellow Belfast native Ross Nicholl to sign up. Thus, team International Peaky Blunders was formed – with an English skipper who has lived in Scotland most of his life and four assorted Irishmen, two southerners and two northerners, the latter now based in Scotland. Deliberations, logistical planning, and head scratching took place via messaging and Zoom calls over the winter.

Fairlead Frank and Even Keel Ed, whilst world class, are dinghy sailors not familiar with Spindrift nor yacht sailing, nor Scottish tides and weather. So, I came up with the cunning plan of Barbara and myself spending a few days sailing with them before the race start.

Our vessel for the adventure was the rather nice Pogo 36, called *Spindrift*, owned by Guy and his wife Barbara. Since the pair live up in the extreme north of Scotland the first exercise was to get the boat to Oban for the start. This involved Guy and Barbara transiting the Pentland Firth and sailing her down to Inverness in strong winds and Ed and Frank flying in from Ireland to join the boat there and to help with the passage through the legendary Caledonian Canal. That picturesque passage involved no pain since the weather was remarkably warm and dry for May. The one regret in terms of practice was that we only managed to actually sail for a short while on Loch Ness, as we made our way through the canal to Fort William. We should mention here that Frank and Ed are dinghy sailors with limited keelboat experience. Once out the other side of the canal, we spent two nights in the area around Oban and enjoyed a little practice in generally quite light winds. The two anchorages chosen by Guy at Loch Spelve and Eilien Dubh Mór (Slate Isles) were spectacular.

Spindrift is quite a complicated boat to sail. With the exception of the reefing mainsail, the power is controlled through sail changes and, due to this complexity, I decided I would do the actual sail changes on deck, with Frank and Ed, helping with helming and hoisting.

The day before the race we took up position in Oban marina, explored the town and provisioned for the adventure. The race started from Oban at midday on Friday 16<sup>th</sup> May with a short run by the event runners including our athletes Matt and Ross.

Weirdly, Barbara did not fancy living onboard with a bunch of men, and abandoned us in Oban for hotels (Oban) and luxury holiday apartments (Troon). Matt arrived with Ross, and he also delivered the excellent homemade food in frozen cartons for the race. Just stick it in the oven and turn the knob. A friend of Matt's also delivered the life raft (just-in-time), that had been away for servicing and stored at Matt's. M and R also retired to a hotel. Was it me or the Irish?

Getting to the start line of a race like the SIPR is always the first challenge as a runner. The tough training and need to run as a pair, doubles the risk of someone coming down with an injury before the race. After months of preparation, I was excited to eventually be starting our adventure in the midday sun in Oban.



### **The Prologue- Oban**

As the start gun fires the race begins with a relatively short 4.6 mile run on mixed terrain on the outskirts of Oban. It serves largely as a way to spread the field so the yachts aren't all trying to flee Oban Bay at the same time.

After a flat section, the race climbs steeply up to Pulpit Hill before crossing a mix of paths and tussocky trails before descending steeply back to the yacht club. The temperature was already beginning to climb.

Last time we did the SIPR, trying to preserve the runners, we took the decision for one of the sailors to row them ashore [and back] in the dinghy. This turned out to be less than optimum,

shall we say. For example, at Arran, after a fantastically quick run, Matt had to borrow a paddle board and come out to *Spindrift*, then bang on the hull to wake us up. Lets not try that again.

Having watched faster teams last time, we made the decision to switch a dinghy for an inflatable (Ross') kayak as our means to get from the shore to Spindrift after our run. With no time for a practice beforehand we were a bit wobbly, but we made it from Spindrift and back again with no dramas to start our sail to Mull. Time and distance: 4.6miles 768ft climb 34min 37 sec.

### Oban to Mull

We anchored a bit away from the mayhem for space and safety reasons to wait. As the pickup time approached, we raised the anchor and hoisted the main, and managed an eventless pickup on the go. We started slightly downwind of the main group and had more distance to travel. So, from the start, we were slightly behind in very light winds and a somewhat adverse tide. By the time we got to the mouth of the channel between the northern end of the Isle of Kerrara and the mainland we had caught up with a few boats. Once we managed to get through the worst of the channel, we got a bit of wind and made good progress through the sound of Mull towards Salen.

The first part of the race, out of Oban bay, was like watching paint dry, the winds were so light. The weather was phenomenal though. We did our best to creep past others where we could. I felt sorry for the heavier boats. I have to confess, we did use my awkward homemade sweeps a bit, mostly to get some steerage to avoid other yachts. Once past Maiden Island (where does that name come from?), we were into a light breeze and started to make better progress. We sailed with our Solent (large jib if you like) and a full mainsail, having to make progress mostly upwind. The Solent is convenient as it is roller furlled and stays hoisted.

### Mull and Ben More

While technically our second run, the arrival at Salen heralds the start of the race proper for us runners. Preferring to run in the hills and on the trails, our first challenge is to tolerate a



fairly unexciting rolling 5-mile tarmac section across Mull in the increasing heat. On reaching the Benmore estate the temperature remained high, but the path turns to gravel and opens to a lovely view across Loch Ba. At about 7 miles the terrain roughens and it's time for a shoe change before the real work begins. The climb up Ben More starts with a steady climb up a grassy path to a col (Creag Mhicfhionniadh), before the path fades, and we contoured over grass and rocks, before a

final push up a rocky section to the summit. At the top we were treated to a stunning view over the west coast of Mull. The descent to our next checkpoint in pathless terrain went

smoothly in the good visibility. In 2022 we took a wrong line from the summit, due to bad visibility, and added 40 mins to our time. I was happy to escape without any nav errors this time. More contouring before a steep grassy descent and we were back to the shores of Loch Ba. The heat was much more tolerable, but cramp threatened to slow our return to Salen. Thankfully some salt tablets did the trick and we kept it steady to finish our run at 11pm. Time and distance: 23.7miles 3898 ft climb 4h52min.

### **Mull to Jura**

We sailors should have rested during the run period but it seemed too early and too soon, so we chatted and mobiled. We also ate so we could set out fuelled and ready once Matt and Ross were back, at about 23:00. Getting away from Mull was initially slow in very little wind, but it improved as we got out into the Sound of Mull and we sailed through the night in light airs towards the next climbing point on Jura.

I found sailing down The Sound of Mull in the dark, at slow speed, in such still quiet waters a bit surreal. Whilst quite spread out, we were amongst a few other competitors, each trying different strategies to progress. So, in the dark you could see white, green and red nav lights all going different ways, occasional vague shapes, and sometimes shouts. Most either did not have AIS or had turned it off. The Sound is not clean, and due to the tidal current, we had to take avoiding action around the rocks and islets, well in advance.

I debated for a while which way to go south: down the Great Race or through the Sound of Luining. It was about timing. If we could up our speed enough, we might get through the worst of the tidal gate before it sets too much against us, if not then outside would be better. As I knew from before, having a fast boat does not automatically mean a good place in this race. Strategy is more important and it seems I always make the wrong choice.

In the end, we diverted inshore, through a narrow channel between Ormsa Rubha Fiola (north of Lunga), a bit spicy due to the shallows and rocks. We could see that a couple of boats were going outside, but we followed another couple going inside for the shorter distance. Unfortunately, the wind had started to drop from a light breeze to taking the piss. We now faced a very significant adverse tidal current here and it was almost impossible to make any progress. We were sailing at about 5 knots through the water, using our A2 spinnaker and full main, going backwards and forwards. An image seared into our memories involved a creel buoy which appeared to be racing ahead of us in the strong stream as we went backwards.

We probably spent 4 hours getting through that channel. We tried both sides, but with no luck until the current eased. For what it's worth, boats who crawled up the west side of the channel seemed to eventually get through even though that position seemed hopeless when we had initially tested it. It's possible that boats with a shorter keel were able to hug the shore safely, but with our 3m keel we couldn't take chances.



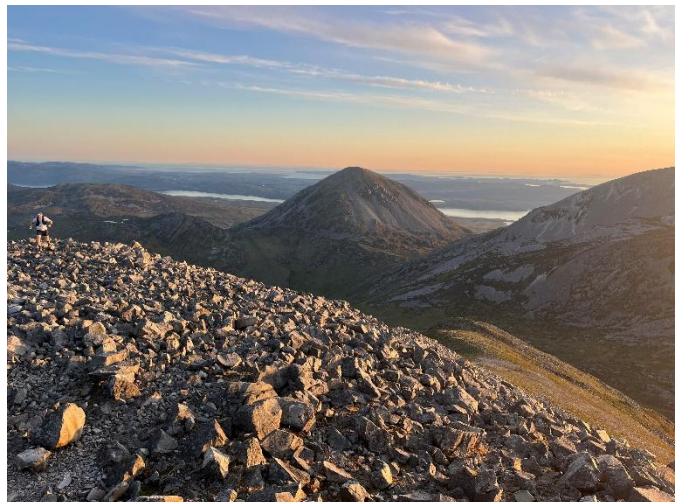
My apologies to anyone who thought we were luffing them through these narrows. Spindrift has an asymmetrical rig and, therefore, is unable to sail directly downwind.

When we did eventually get through the wind, it went from taking the piss, to laughing its socks off, and getting to Craighouse involved periods of each sailor (in pairs) rowing and resting in hot sun and no wind. We were probably mid-fleet or worse by the time we arrived at Craighouse. The lads set off to do their mountain run.

Shortly before we arrived on Jura it was time to time to get the kayak ready for action, a two-minute job in theory. That was until we realised one side of the kayak had deflated. After a quick pump up we realised one of the bladders had burst!! Ooops!! Embarking for Craighouse, we gave a last few pumps into the kayak and hoped for the best. Thankfully, although a little lopsided, we arrived without incident.

(Nothing encourages you to paddle faster than a sinking canoe.)

On Jura, we got underway after another thorough kit check. One of the beauties of the SIPR is the variety of the running courses and, unlike Mull, the initial tarmac section is very short before the climbing begins. Following a dry spring, the gentle climb across the grassy lowlands was made easier by firmer terrain, but with the sun still



shining brightly and no shade, the temperatures sucked at our energy levels. Following a deer track, we contoured around the 506m summit of Beinn Mhearsamall before an incredibly steep 338 m ascent to the first pap, Beinn a Chaolais. The brutal climb was rewarded with a cool breeze at the top and another delightful west coast dusk. Checkpoint tagged, it was time

for an equally steep descent and over some pretty sketchy scree before another climb to Beinn a Oir, Pap number two. Thankfully the second descent is a bit easier under foot and climb number three went without incident. Unless a closely guarded secret, there is no easy descent from Beinn Shiantaidh - Pap number 3. We opted for retracing our steps before taking a faint steep contouring path down towards Loch an t Siob. By the time we reached the path towards the bridge over the Corran, our legs were glad of the break from climbing and descending. It was a case of head down and grind out the last undulating miles before the flat road section back to Craighouse. A quick top up of the kayak and Section 2 completed - 15.7 miles, 5293 ft climb time 4h31m.

While us three sailors were deep asleep, the anchor alarm went off. As I started to casually put some gear on to check the situation, Ed burst out of his and Frank's cabin, dressed in boxer shorts, one sailing boot and a life jacket. Perhaps I had forgotten to warn them about the alarms. It was caused by us swinging to a wind change, and I had set the turning circle too small.

### Jura to Arran



By the time we got away from Craighouse, the wind appeared to still be dead inshore, but out in the bay it improved a little and, in time, we got into medium airs. We passed a few boats in the dark and made our way down in the direction of the Mull of Kintyre. This was initially a fairly straightforward sail with reasonable wind. Ed wisely decided to take a sleep while Guy and Frank stayed on deck and were treated to a spectacular display of phosphorescence off the stern. As the Pogo has a very wide, open transom this really threw up a magical display. Then the wind suddenly blew up out of nowhere to 20 knots plus, and we steered inshore and close to the wind, so that Guy could put in reefs. By the time we had

the reefs in the wind had eased and, unfortunately, we got caught in the doldrums around the bottom of the headland for a while, but eventually it filled again. We possibly had gone in too close inshore to reef, and ended in wind shadow, but had to go close to the wind to take the

pressure off the Main to be able to reduce sail. In general, our skipper Guy did most of the foredeck work because he knew the boat best and Frank and Ed hadn't really had the chance to practice sail changes in a range of conditions. So, Guy was working hardest, doing the vast majority of the foredeck work and had very little sleep. While the Pogo 36 is a very impressive fast cruiser and a brilliant boat, it is a cruising boat, so all the sail changes and reefing inevitably took time, with Guy doing the vast majority of that work.

The wind improved and we got around the bottom of that headland leading into the Mull of Kintyre in good shape. There were strong offshore gusts and we kept the boat flat by luffing into the gusts to keep us close inshore and out of the adverse tide. Guy wasn't over-enthusiastic about this technique as it took us closer to the rocks inshore with the risk that if we accidentally tacked in the unstable gusts, we were heading for the rocks. But we survived and we had a very pleasant rounding of that often-challenging headland. Whilst Spindrift is faster than a speeding bullet offwind, she is still quite fast upwind, and in these mean 15/18 knot winds, we were doing over 8 knots boat speed upwind (4 to 6 knots SOG).

We made good progress as winds were solid and the boat was going well. We could also see that we had caught up with a fair proportion of the fleet who were caught in light winds and current seemingly towards the far side of Sanda island. This was the one situation where it was almost an advantage to be behind as we could read the wind and current ahead of us by the boats caught in tide and light airs. Thus, we took a hike offshore for better winds and tacked just inside the small island and found ourselves doing well, catching the main fleet. The current was also turning in our favour. Then the wind died for everyone and only those who went well outside the island and way off course seemed to be still moving. Guy had a forecast suggesting that the wind would fill from behind. With no wind, we conserved energy and rested while waiting for the new wind to arrive. When wind did reach us, we flew the Code 0 which footed on the bowsprit and could not be used lower than 150/160 degrees. As it happened, the wind came more from astern than forecast, and those who had traditional symmetric kites were able to go deeper and straighter and get away. But we did catch up with the fleet again, just off their tails, as we approached Arran. The Code Zero was ideal for the final approach to Lamlash, but we steered too close inshore while chasing down one competitor, lost pressure and lost two boats on the outside.

Once close enough in, at Lamlash Bay, Matt and Ross took off in their bendy kayak, potentially having to pump it up on route. Finding a clean anchorage at Lamlash took time with an offshore breeze and fairly crowded anchorage and moorings. By the time we anchored and ate there was just an hour or so available for a kip.

Arran is the island I have visited the most and the fact that there is a well-established path up Goatfell, gave me confidence there would be no navigational issues here. We knew our legs would be tired, but we had the advantage of knowing the running would be complete after we arrived back at Lamlash pier.



Another wobbly kayak in, a kit check, and we were off. Coincidentally again at 5 pm. The first section between Lamlash and Brodick is a mix of undulating trail and tarmac before the ever pretty Fisherman's Walk delivered us to the bottom of the climb up Goatfell. On our way up we caught a number of other teams. Although a bit tired, we were both moving well and

soon were rewarded by the 360 vista from the top of Goatfell, our final peak. It's a nice feeling. The initial descent is rocky and bouldery, with no room for mistakes, but it's eminently more runnable than the scree on Jura. Once back on tarmac, and the chance of a fall reduced, it was just a case of flogging out the last miles back to Lamlash. While none of the climbs are severe, it's surprising how hard they can feel after 55 miles of running. Boom and we had done it: 19.3 miles, 4259ft climb 3hr 43min and our job was over. The kayak held up and we climbed onboard Spindrift for our final leg back to Troon. By the time we arrived back on board, we were greeted by three very weary sailors. While the running on SIPR is tough, the sailors, in many ways, have a far tougher job. At this stage we had run for a total of about 14 hours while the sailors had sailed for 43 hours since setting off."

### Arran to Troon

There was no phone signal on Arran, so no alerts from the lads that they were on route back. And, in fact, our athletes had a great run and arrived back earlier than expected (later Barbara told me were lying somewhere 5<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> place at this point, possibly). This caught me by surprise, and in my tired state, with no wind forecast, I made an error on sail choice, as we rushed to get ready. There was a medium breeze at anchor, and we would be sailing upwind to Troon, so I opted for full Main and Solent.

As we headed out the North Channel, now in the dark, the wind increased considerably and was funnelling in with big waves. We were very much overpowered, but were in confined waters, so my intention was to weather the way upwind as best I could, then do the reefs and sail changes in more open water. In my tiredness earlier, I had not tied the Code 0 sail (in its bag) down properly and a wave flushed this from the foredeck. It seemed to be floating. So, we went back to try to get it. I used this as an opportunity to put three reefs in the main, and furl the solent. In the dark, we just made out the floating sail bag in the distance and carried out a man overboard type recovery. By the time we had the bag onboard we were in shallow water and the keel was dragging through sand.

With the errant sail back on board we headed out in darkness in a lot of wind and very disturbed sea on our final leg to Troon. With the violent pitching we had a severe case of seasickness to manage, to add to our woes. Sailing at a comfortable angle on the reefed main, we worked our way back out from Lamlash Bay while Guy put set up the inner forestay again, and tied in the reefs on the stay sail before hoisting. With the difficult sea state and conditions, this all took time, and we had the boat on a more southerly heading than ideal. A number of yachts passed us in the dark. Once sails were sorted, we got going and the boat went very well with that sail configuration, and we were back up to planing speeds of 8 or 9 knots. Steering was tricky in the pitch dark with difficult seas and finding the right balance to keep momentum to get through the waves but still maintaining height, was a fine art which we didn't fully achieve. We went quite well though until we were about 5 miles off Troon - very likely too far south of Troon because of our start position post-reefing. Then the rudder started feeling strange and unresponsive and initially we couldn't figure out what was wrong. We were all exhausted and not thinking clearly, especially Guy and Frank who'd had the least sleep. Matt was on deck for this sail and was a great help. Through exhaustion, it took us a while to figure out that the wind had dropped but the sea state was still very disturbed and we had too little canvas up for the new conditions. We floundered around for a while before we woke up Guy, curled up on the cockpit floor. Guy and Ed shook out two reefs and we unfurled the solent headsail, and doused the staysail. The boat settled into a proper groove and we made progress again, despite a very shifty offshore wind with big variations in pressure. It was tricky to spot the entrance to the marina at Troon which was very narrow and through a commercial shipping area. We entered cautiously with just a reefed mainsail and thus it took a while to get through the outer harbour, where all wind had dropped and we were making only 1 or 2 knots, until close enough to launch Matt and Ross, with pump, in the deflating kayak for the final short run to register our finish.



We finished on Monday at 05.05.56 – 17th across the line of 39 boats (to be confirmed) We were exhausted but happy and relieved to have finished the race safely. We spent about an hour tidying up the sails and equipment in the marina and the sailors crashed to spend most of that day

sleeping while Matt and Ross headed back towards Glasgow and home to catch up with family life.

The following day we learned that we had won the Old Dogs award for greatest combined age to finish the race at 296 years. It was a remarkable experience to do the SIPR with a great team. We were all delighted, and relieved, just to finish safely but winning the Old Dogs Trophy was a bit of icing on the cake!