

WORDS SAM GRIFFITHS
PICTURES SAM GRIFFITHS,
SHREWSBURY SCHOOL

SCOTTISH ISLANDS PEAKS RACE



A gripping account of Shrewsbury School's Hunt Running Club – the oldest in the world – and their thrilling debut in an epic two-day race across fells and water.

'Runners!' went the cry. Lamlash, on the Isle of Arran at first light on a Sunday morning is a fairly inauspicious little hamlet. Yet it would soon welcome the remainder of the 40 boats that had silently crept in to the bay having sailed through the night round the Mull of Kintyre. Now the sailors waited anxiously for their runners to return from the 19-mile round trip up Goat Fell; the sails were impatiently waiting to fill, the dinghies, ready to transport the runners out, were bobbing in anticipation.

And there they are, the stumbling figures of Tom Jackson, Sam Western and Simon Adney (OS) shuffle, for that is all they can manage, the last few hundred metres in a stunning 3hrs 47mins. I hand them their lifejackets which they fumble on, collapsing in the dinghy only to writhe in an agony of cramp and exhaustive disinterest. A frantic row out to Brown Bear followed by a shaky scramble aboard ensure we have a crucial 17-minute lead over our nearest rivals, Fettes College on La Giraffe. There was now just the small matter of a 15-mile sail across the Firth of Clyde to Troon and the finish. Surely nothing could stop us winning the Youth Section now...?

First held in 1983, the Scottish Islands Peak Race is a somewhat original adventure race for teams of sailors and fell runners.

Since 1992 there has also been a hotly contested Youth Section that has attracted mainly Scottish schools, but also ones from England and even Aiglon College from Switzerland. The race is non-stop and starts in Oban with a short 4-mile hill run. You then sail to Mull, run 18 miles over Ben Talaidh, sail to Jura, run 14 miles over some of the Paps, sail to Arran, run 19 miles up and down Goat Fell (often in the dark!), and then sail to Troon. Youth teams consist of six pupils who run in pairs with an adult, each pair doing one island with the fastest pair running the Oban section. Each team carries a tracker for safety; this also provides an addictive way of following their position on a mobile if you download the free app! Indeed, it was wonderful to feel the support of the school community via the tracker; some must have even woken in the night to check it as I received a message at 3am on Sunday asking why we were not moving!

The most difficult task is finding someone who wants to offer their yacht to a team of ten unwashed souls! The famous explorer, Bill Tilman, used to advertise in the Times for crew by stating 'No pay, no prospects, not much pleasure' and it was in a similar vein that I appealed to my boarding house parent's (Ingram's Hall) in the summer of 2017. Yet low and behold, who should come forward but Hugh Clay, rounder of Cape Horn, Arctic sailor and veteran of the Scottish, British and even Australian versions of what is affectionately known as 'Peaks Racing'. He very generously offered to skipper his Pocock 45 with David Russell, a circumnavigator from Suffolk.

Left: The Scottish Islands Peak Race route ©Crown copyright 2020 Ordnance Survey, Media Licence 012/20. Above left to right: Brown Bear enters Troon harbour, the view back to Lamlash from the summit of Goat Fell, the summit of Ben Talaidh ©Sam Griffiths, Shrewsbury School

A year of 'due diligence' ensued before we committed to taking Shrewsbury's famous Hunt running club north to create another chapter in its illustrious history. Having been kindly driven the nine hours to Oban on Thursday afternoon in the speed-restricted (62mph!) minibus by parent Shaun Western (who would then take it to Troon), we spent the morning at the Race Briefing, got vaguely familiar with Brown Bear and then brought her round to the start line.

The club's famous 'Huntsman's Cry' of 'All hounds who wish to run, run hard, run well and may the devil take the hindmost' was on our breaths at midday on Friday 17 May. The evocative sound of the bagpipes filled the air as Tom and Sam charged en masse around the undulating course in Oban. Forty boats vied for pole position near the pier, the holiday sunshine belying an atmosphere of pent-up energy and competitive spirit, ready for the Le Mans-style start. Two by two the runners sprinted down the road and leapt in to their rubber dinghies, rowed to the eager yacht (doing their best not to be hit and drowned) before heading up the Sound of Mull.

There were only light airs, but the magic carpet of the flooding tide soon swept us up to Salen, where at 5.50pm, Paddy Barlow, James Weir and Simon Adney were rowed ashore to face the first

of three rigorous five-minute kit checks. With no marshals on the route, the rucksacks had to be emptied: waterproof bottoms and top, thermals, hat, gloves, emergency shelter, map, compass and emergency rations were all accounted for; no costly return to the yacht was necessary.

For the waiting crew there was little rest to be had; Brown Bear had to be anchored, sails stowed and supper cooked. The sailors then rested while the remaining four boys played cards in the sun, no doubt contemplating their own upcoming running leg with increasing anxiety.

Despite setting off behind Fettes A and Windermere, it was clear to see from the tracker app that Shrewsbury's runners had overtaken them, but as this was only updated every half an hour, I rowed ashore early to await them.

Led by the indomitable Paddy, all three piled aboard after their hugely pleasing 3hrs 37mins, including Ben Talaidh, while the rest of the crew fumbled with the spinnaker. Windermere School on Kittiwake soon ghosted past us in the fading light, their 35ft monohull making the most of the almost non-existent breeze. Soon the oars were put to use up in the bow, but at 45ft and 14 tonnes, it was almost possible to hear Brown Bear laugh at our feeble efforts.



An awe-inspiring landscape of Mordor-like proportions gave us a misty embrace, the ephemeral tracts enticing one onwards through a landscape of heather, bogs, fleas and ticks. Even the hundreds of deer questioned our presence in this untamed wasteland, nonchalantly looking up as we came within touching distance.

Off the final Pap, all three youth teams charged down the scree and boulders, through leg-cutting bracken, before a 'Death March' back along the road to the dinghies. The wind rose, the sails filled, copious amounts of pasta were hungrily devoured and midnight became the new estimated time of arrival for the final run; the stage was set for an unheard-of finale on Arran.

But sailing can be a fickle business, and just as we were congratulating ourselves on going around 'the Mull' with no seasickness and keeping the Youth Teams just behind us, the wind, like four of our six runners, seemed to clamber into its bunk.

A long slumber ensued; that is apart from James Weir and Max Green who, in a Herculean effort, took it in turns to row Brown Bear forward, close in to the shore, taking every short-cut possible. At long last a slight breeze edged us past Holy Isle and at 5.10am we rowed ashore, a minute behind our rivals, and watched heart in mouth as our team set off one last time.

Rowing back to Brown Bear, I found the entire crew asleep, seemingly dead to the world. The tranquil, sleepy delights of Lamhass were soon extinguished as the first four adult yachts

got ready to receive their runners. Like whippets on a leash, the moment the painter from the dinghy was thrown up, the oars of the yachts dug in as they looked for any small advantage on the final leg.

It was very quickly our turn; as we crept out of the bay, our tacks seemed to mock us as we made little headway east. Sam Watts on the binoculars spotted Fettes shougle (as the Scots say) along the road and in what seemed like only seconds, La Giraffe was behind us. It was now decision time for Hugh and David, but they stuck to the rhumb line, leaving the others to risk going north or south to find better wind.

At no point could we relax; after 48 hours on the boat, the now suffocating smell of ten muddy and sweaty males exuding from the cabin become ever more invasive as we wished Troon harbour closer. But at just after 1pm on Sunday, the exhausted crew of Brown Bear could finally celebrate. All that remained was a dinghy paddle to the nearest pier and a triumphant run up to the Harbourmaster's office and the finish.

Warm smiles from the wonderfully supportive and superbly organised Race Committee greeted us and a bottle of champagne was thrust in to our hands. Shrewsbury School on Brown Bear, at the first time of asking, had become Youth Champions of the Scottish Islands Peaks Race!



As darkness descended we reached the Firth of Lorne just as the tide started to flood against us at Duart Castle, but the breeze remained from the north-west, enabling us to nudge south. At this point, Hugh and David, a veritable Davies and Carruthers of the 21st century, made the inspired choice to sail wide and west of Fladda and its powerful tidal gate, before ducking in through the potentially treacherous Corryvreckan at slack water.

By first light the rain had really set in, but the tracker confirmed that we had moved up in to third place overall and first in the

Youth Class; a stunning piece of sailing. But now the lighter boats behind soon caught back up to us as we all took advantage of the ebbing tide to eventually arrive in Craighouse at 9am on Saturday.

Jura was the island home of George Orwell when he wrote 1984, so it seemed appropriate that the oppressive presence of Fettes A on La Giraffe and Windermere on Kittiwake, eventually hunted down Max Green, Sam Watts and myself on our 14-mile wilderness run over some of the famous Paps.

Above left to right: The boys play cards with the mountains of Mull behind them, yachts in Oban Bay the night before the race and the victory march to the Harbourmaster's office. Next page: The Shrewsbury School's winning youth team ©Sam Griffiths, Shrewsbury School