

The Devizes to Westminster Canoe Race

"What are you doing at Easter?"

The words came innocently down the phone from my friend Rebecca – she of Everest. Words such as these usually involve me in some form of suffering, so my response was somewhat guarded.

"Nothing" I said.

"Good. Would you like to be my support crew for the Devizes to Westminster Canoe Race?"

"OK" said I, knowing not a whit about either canoeing or this race, apart from the fact that it was very long.

Thursday afternoon before Easter saw Becks and her partner in the race, Steve Seaton, the editor of 'Runners Weekly', together with myself, my son and a friend squeezing into her Landrover, canoe tied atop, heading for Devizes.

Three weeks prior to this neither Becks nor Steve had ever sat in a canoe, much less paddled any distance. The Devizes to Westminster is some 125 miles and in their class, non stop. A few outings on the tideway, usually associated with capsizing and rescue and a four hour stint on the Kennet and Avon canal saw them 'prepared' as much as they would ever be. They could go in a straight line but had difficulty in turning and stopping, and continued to capsize at regular intervals.

The leaflet about the Devizes to Westminster states that all crews should be experienced and to have been in training for at least three months if they hoped to finish.

At this moment Providence mercifully intervened. The canoe that they had intended to use, a sleek new slim, highly polished red job, usually the source of their undoing, fell from its roof rack mounting and became a rather fractured new sleek red job, much to the consternation of he who had lent it to them.

The only other alternative was an old battered, wide, much patched canoe in which they had taken their first tentative strokes at the Richmond Canoe Club those few weeks before, but one in which they had never capsized.

Thursday evening was spent feverishly preparing honey and banana sandwiches and over 30 litres of the special high energy drink on which they would mainly rely to sustain them throughout their arduous journey. Bed at 1am Friday morning, up at 5 am, not the most restful preparation for the next 48 hours, and off to the start.

We pretended not to notice the various strips of brown tape, bailer twine, patches and adornments that testified to the longevity of our canoe amongst all those slim, polished, new, cherished, canoes all around us, their crews engaged in earnest conversation about conditions while making final adjustments and fine tuning to their craft. The rudder adjustment screws on our canoe had rusted and were immovable, ensuring that to steer required the body to be slightly twisted to reach the pedal. Still, what's a little twisting when stuck in the same position for 35 hours.

At 7.31 on Good Friday the canoe was launched and the intrepid pair gingerly paddled away. Because they were canoeing with Sir Ranulph Fiennes and for Cancer Relief, this was done in the full glare of the media. Steve in the back was instructed to sit very still while Rebecca paddled round the first corner in case they capsized under the arc lights and the video tape. Their prayers were answered.

Our job, the job of the support crew, was simple. During the race there are some 85 portages in which the canoes have to be carried around either locks or weirs. It was our duty to make contact, hopefully every hour or two, to sustain, nourish, cherish and generally care for and cosset our crew and their every need. Orienteering by car, ordnance survey and lock guide through the Wiltshire, Berkshire and Oxfordshire countryside was to be a challenge, particularly at the dead of night with nobody around. The first rendezvous went smoothly, and the second. At the third we arrived after the pair had gone through but it took us 40 minutes to figure this out. The fact that they had passed through was confirmed in a terse one liner, not fit for the pages of this esteemed journal, in a mobile phone message, when we returned to our vehicle. We were, however, forgiven at the next stop when we arrived with a white flag and almond slices as a peace offering.

There are several races within the Devizes to Westminster race, seniors, juniors, singles, pairs, the marathon non-stop but the main event is the

four day race, each section being run as a sprint over 30-40 miles throughout the Easter weekend, an extremely competitive event.

Throughout the first day the canal bank was thronged with support teams, coaches, parents, all urging their teams on, cramming Mars bars and goodies into the mouths of the canoeists while portaging, yelling, bullying, cajoling each team to greater effort.

We, for our part and as we were to proceed for considerably longer without a break, took a more leisurely and civilised approach. While not actually laying out a linen table cloth on the canal bank at the various stops, we did provide a selection of assorted delicacies for the perusal of our intrepid pair, goodies which were then consumed at a gentle pace while a break was taken.

The special hands-off drinking bottles harnessed to chests, or in Beck's case between chests, were replenished; their consumption through the whole journey averaging approximately half a litre an hour. Weather conditions and international news were generally discussed before they launched the canoe into the river and were gone.

And so the day progressed until at 6.00pm at Newbury as the rain came with the dusk, everyone appeared to vanish but us. The fast marathon crews had passed hours before and by dint of an early start (starting times are selected by the crews, the overall time from start to finish determines the race order), we were ahead of the rest of the pack.

The four day canoes stopped at Newbury but our canoe headed in splendid isolation into the night.

Reading at 10.00pm saw the end of the Kennet and Avon canal and the first acquaintance with a very swollen flooded Thames. We kissed them goodbye as they headed for the first rough water. .

At midnight we were in position at Shiplake. When our pair were one and a half hours overdue we contacted race control in London who informed us that most boats had been stopped in Reading for the night because of the dangerous state of the river and of the weirs. At that moment, our duo swept somewhat raggedly and out of control into view, the only crew, and certainly the most ill equipped, for some reason still on the river who hadn't been stopped.

After a change of clothes and a feed they relaunched into the swirling current and disappeared from sight – travelling backwards.

Throughout the long night we meandered the country lanes of Berkshire and Oxfordshire until dawn saw us approaching the outskirts of the metropolis, still without a capsize or a diversion over a weir, (unlike two teams of the marines who it was rumoured had shot a weir on purpose just for fun. They were rescued alive!)

At Windsor the river was too high to allow them to shoot the bridge and at Staines the pair were unable to land due to the strong current and their inability to move in any other direction than forwards. At Hampton Court, at midday, they appeared in time to see Ru sprinting along the

river bank with a huge steaming "4 Seasons" pizza, the first hot food for 36 hours, fresh baked 100 yards away. Teddington saw their arrival two hours ahead of schedule but in good time to catch the tide. 6.00pm saw a tiny canoe hugging the bank, bobbing towards Westminster, the tide running with them but a strong wind against them.

As Big Ben struck 6.30pm they shot Westminster Bridge and the finish. Landing was an interesting exercise as they headed on towards the North Seal Champagne corks rightfully popped as our exhausted heroic pair were plucked from the fast running Thames to a worthy welcome. One hundred and twenty five miles, 35 hours non-stop, no capsizes and no major disasters.

Sir Ranulph Fiennes in the other boat somewhat cruelly summed it up when congratulating them. He had started some four hours after them and finished an hour ahead. "Well done Becks", he said, "you must be exhausted considering you've been at it six hours longer than us!" What I believe is known as damning with faint praise.

For our part we had a fun time. Our navigators hit the rendezvous unerringly and we saw slumbering Thameside towns in a way few ever see them. As an event it is, indeed, arduous but the atmosphere surrounding it makes for a wonderful occasion for crews and supporters alike. To any younger reader, I commend it to you.

If I were only younger!

Sandy Scott