

Devizes Westminster 2010

Preparation is key to record success

Steady rain in the week leading up to Easter produced a good flow on the river and a winning DW 2010 time of 16:20:24 for Richard Hendron and James King. It was an impressive performance by the Richmond Canoe Club/British Army pair that produced the 13th fastest DW time, coming in 70 minutes faster than second place and just 45 minutes off the course record of 15:34:12.

Feature by: Peter Hutchison. **At all levels, the Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon is about preparation, combined with strategy and planning. Hendron and Price had a late start on Saturday giving them just a couple of hours light on the Kennet and Avon and then darkness in the countryside of Wiltshire.**

Photos by: Peter Hutchinson, unless stated otherwise.

More information: Visit the Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon at www.drace.org.uk.

“Because of the time we would be losing at portages due to not being able to see them we decided to push it hard on the canal. By Marlow we were both hitting the wall and from there it was just a case of survival,” recalls Hendron.

Conditions were good with lots of flow, though not in flood, and mild temperatures. Eight times DW veteran (at 29-years of age), Hendron says while it wasn't his hardest race, it was the most painful, adding “taking it 3% slower on the canal would've made us 15-20 minute faster as we wouldn't have started to crash out.”

That's within 25 minutes of the record set back in 1979. Can Hendron imagine the 30-year record being broken? “Yes, easily,” he says, “with the right amount of flow, good support team, a lot of preparation and good head strong paddlers I think the record can be smashed.” Anyone with experience of the 125-mile course would be astounded by such boldness. So how?

“Preparation, preparation, preparation,” says Richard, pointing out that he and Price had only paddled three times since last year, only got in their race boat two days before the race and didn't have high-powered lights to navigate at night.

It's an exciting prospect, and it would be great to see more elite paddlers stepping up to the mark to take on the challenge of what must be one of sport's most enduring records.

Preparation makes for DW success

Talking about the race Chief Course Coordinator and man with his finger on the pulse of the race Paul Ralph suggests that real competition may be some way off. “The senior men's K2 was well won by a deserving crew that were streets ahead of the



Above: Portaging at Kintbury.

rest,” he says. Reflecting on a year with high expectations, Ralph suggests that many of the teams failed to live up to their potential due to lack of preparation. “The canal was challenging because it was muddy, but with the right footwear you can make good of that. And the river was cranking along.”

Even so a few records were broken. The mixed K2 crew of Paul Enoch and Harriet Farish from Nottingham CC finished in a record time of 17:30:31. Junior mixed doubles pair Megan Middleton and Michael Southey of Fowey River CC took 91 minutes off the record, finishing in 16:24:08. The Reading CC junior ladies crew of Amoret King and Amelia Churnside finished in 16:28:18, beating second place Isobel Smith (Basingstoke CC) and Naomi Smith (All Hallows) by 40 seconds, with both teams beating the previous record by over 90 minutes. In senior singles, Steffen Burkhardt finished in 15:08:03.

It is DW's open-to-all approach that makes it so appealing to anyone looking for a serious challenge. Entry numbers stacked up, with close to 300 boats of all classes and over 550 paddlers



Above: Setting out from Devizes.



Above: Portaging in heavy rain. Photo: Zoom Picture Agency.

taking part. Of the 154 senior doubles that left Devizes Wharf, 101 made it to the finish line just downstream of Westminster Bridge – a retirement rate of around 30%. International entrants came from 14 countries, including the oldest entrant Bob Vincent from Canada, aged 67, taking part in a C2.

For all the numbers and records, the race was littered with tales of personal endeavour and perseverance. That DW is a hard event is well known. You know that's true when you overhear a group of two Paratrooper crews at the Westminster Village finish reflecting on their race and one says, “that's the toughest thing I've ever done.” Off the water, hundreds of volunteers work over the Easter weekend providing a valuable contribution to make the race happen. Some of them reckon it's one of the most enjoyable things they've ever done.

Big field brings challenges

The number of entrants is a tribute to the unique challenge presented by DW to paddlers. The races success brings

challenges to the organising team, particularly with support crews and cars making their way down to the crew. One boat is thought to have been followed by 11 supporters using seven cars. With many crews having multiple support crews, DW organisers are expected to explore ways of limiting the number of support vehicles moving down the course. The route of the course, combined with the time of year and the overnight nature of the event, demand that competitors and their support crews are considerate to waterside communities.

Challenges on the water also rear their head. With conditions looking good for record breaking runs, the familiar debate over daylight runs returned. A daylight run allows a crew to complete most of the canal and fifty or so portages in the day, making that section much quicker. Race winner Richard Hendron puts his view on the subject. “Allowing crews to choose between the two tides effectively creates two different races with potentially two different conditions. The race is what it is, and those who relish the challenges the DW throws at you will keep on coming back,” says



Above: Senior doubles winners Richard Hendron and Jim King.

Hendron, adding “Cornish and Greenham's record will be in danger in the next few years if conditions are right.”

And what of next year? It's a late Easter, with race dates from 22 to 25 April 2010. Will being warmer make it easier? Ralph brings the voice of experience again. “It may be a late Easter, but conditions can be really unpleasant.” As if to reinforce the importance of preparation at all levels, Paul points out that he's already helping a team get ready for DW 2011 as it's coaching and technique that will really make the difference.

So whether you're elite, stepping up to the DW challenge for the first time, or somewhere in between, it's time to start preparing for DW2011. ♡

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