

Devizes to Westminster: hell on high water

The Devizes to Westminster canoe race is just about the toughest thing you can do on two paddles, writes adventure athlete Tobias Mews



A two-man crew capsizes moments from the finish line on The Thames Photo: Ollie Harding

By Tobias Mews

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As the sun rose on this Easter Sunday morning, while you snoozed snugly in your bed, 650 weary and sleep deprived kayakers were reaching the crucial part in the Devizes to Westminster International Canoe Race (the DW, as it's commonly known). At precisely 6.49am, the teams knew they had to be at Teddington Lock. Too early or too late and the tide would become their enemy. But at 6.49am, the tide – and indeed the force – would quite literally be with them.

Fortunately, like you, I too was in bed on Easter Sunday morning. But I haven't always been so lucky.

Held every Easter weekend for the past 66 years, the DW is a 125 mile non-stop canoe race that takes roughly 24 hours to complete. It's a true man-test that requires bucket loads of grit, a decent amount of skill, good balance, and a healthy dose of physical and mental stamina. Those who successfully complete it get, in the words of the organisers, "a memorable sense of achievement" -

which is an understatement to rule all understatements.

This year, when a friend rang me ahead of the race and asked me to fill a seat vacated by one of his teammates, it didn't take me long to formulate the sentence "Sorry, mate, got too much on". I wasn't lying - but I also wasn't exactly saddened to be answering in the negative. Four and a half years earlier I'd been asked the same question and agreed to do it, despite the fact that I'd never sat in a two-man kayak (K2) before. I threw myself in at the deep end and almost drowned as a result.

To put the race in context, the DW is not for beginner kayakers. In fact, the race is normally the culmination of years of paddling, and just finishing is considered an achievement (every year, roughly a third fail to do so). It's one of the most gruelling events in the pantheon of endurance races.

Training is lengthy - and frequently grim. You have to train throughout winter in wet suits and with a torch attached to your head. And then there's the art of getting in and out of the kayak. If you've not practiced this skill enough by the time you start the DW, then you'll have 77 opportunities to do so. At various sections along the course, such as locks or if the canal is frozen over (as was the case in the year I did it), portage comes into play and you have to carry the boat on land until you're safely allowed to get back in the river. This is, I promise, harder than it sounds, especially when you've already been paddling for 16 hours or so and Westminster seems a very long way ahead.

In order to train for the DW, you're encouraged to take part in the Waterside Series of marathon races - four races held on the Kennet and Avon Canal that allow you to become familiar with parts of the route and for your support crew to practice looking after you.

Here is another vital point about the DW. It's impossible to complete it without a support crew - who have the onerous task of following you through the race, meeting up with you at pre-arranged checkpoints to offer you food, water, spare kit, a big hug and bracing words of encouragement. Finding friends who are willing to give up their Easter weekend to drive what amounts to several hundred miles with no sleep, and hang around the riverside in the dark and/or rain waiting for you to arrive, can be tricky. They tend, as you might expect, to be family.

My memories of this race are, unsurprisingly, quite clear. My hands became like claws. My arms turned to lead. I had a trapped nerve in my back. I was stiff in places I never knew possible. At times I was so cold, I had to run up and down the bank to warm up. On one of my excursions I heard a flapping sound above me, only to turn and narrowly miss being hit by an angry, dive bombing swan. Eating non-stop for 24 hours does nothing for your appetite. The support crew brought us hamburgers, pizza and chips - three of my favourite foods - but I could hardly stomach more than a mouthful.

We made it to Westminster Bridge in 25 hours 39 minutes - quite a bit slower than the sub 24hr plan we'd hoped for. But I have to say that walking up Westminster quay with our kayak was one of the proudest moments of my life - despite the fact that we managed to fall in 10 metres from the finish and had to be "rescued".

In the last four years, I've run half a dozen sub-3 hour marathons, multiple Ironman triathlons, expedition adventure races, multi-stage mountain bike races, cycle sportives and ultra marathons across deserts, jungles and mountain ranges. But looking back, it was the DW that gave me the confidence to believe I could do anything I set my mind to.

Respect to all DW racers everywhere. It's a life enhancing experience.

Next year's **Devizes to Westminster** will take place on 4/5th April 2015. There are a choice of five classes you can enter (senior doubles, senior singles, junior doubles, veteran junior or endeavour). Only the senior doubles is non-stop.

The deadline for entry is two weeks prior to Good Friday 2015.

Senior Doubles entry fee is £150.

Image by **Ollie Harding**

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