

The Devizes to Westminster 2014

Article by Peter Hutchison

THE ANSWER TO YOUR WINTER PADDLING BLUES

After a great summer, the best way to square up to the prospect of cold winter months is with the challenge of training through the dark nights to take part in Devizes Westminster International Canoe Marathon.

The 125-mile course from Devizes in Wiltshire to Westminster Bridge in the heart of London may be daunting, but with planning, preparation and training, it's a few months of focussed training to success for anyone prepared to put in the effort.

Imagine the sense of achievement you'd feel in Easter having put in the training and completed DW 2014. It's time to sign up. Here are a few tips to developing your DW campaign, provided by a selection of crews with differing abilities.

Shuna Braithwaite and Kat Burbeck celebrate finishing their third race.

WHAT'S INVOLVED?

First up, you need to work out which DW you want to do. Senior Doubles is the straight through, non-stop race for adults over 18. Alternatively break the course down over four days as a Junior, Vet/Junior, Singles or Senior Endeavour crew. Whichever you choose it's a gruelling challenge that will demand growing attention as training increases in the months and weeks leading up to Easter 2014.

BUILDING A CREW

Once you've decided to enter, you'll probably need a partner. Look for someone with the same goals. The experience is too intense to find out that one of you is

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happy to finish while the other is looking for a sub-24 hour time. Be open and honest with each other; if your goals are different, find a better-matched partner.

With the crew sorted, the next step is to get training. Senior Doubles 2013 winner Stuart West recommends starting as early as possible and training as often as you can as, "There's no substitute for time in the boat."

TECHNIQUE

Training should cover a range of elements. Good technique, says Junior Doubles 2013 winner Louis Allen, is key. "You can rely on it when you're tired," he says, suggesting it distracts you from the pain and, of course, means you go faster. Joining a club is one of the best ways of working on your technique, even better if the club has a history of DW competition.

Make a training plan that builds as the race approaches, mix it up; time on the water with both distance and interval training work, running, gym works (repetitions rather than building bulk). Paul Hayes, two-time finisher, suggests the training plan is a way of reinforcing positive progress. "Reward yourself with treats when you hit milestones," Paul suggests, "Garmin do some great incentives!"

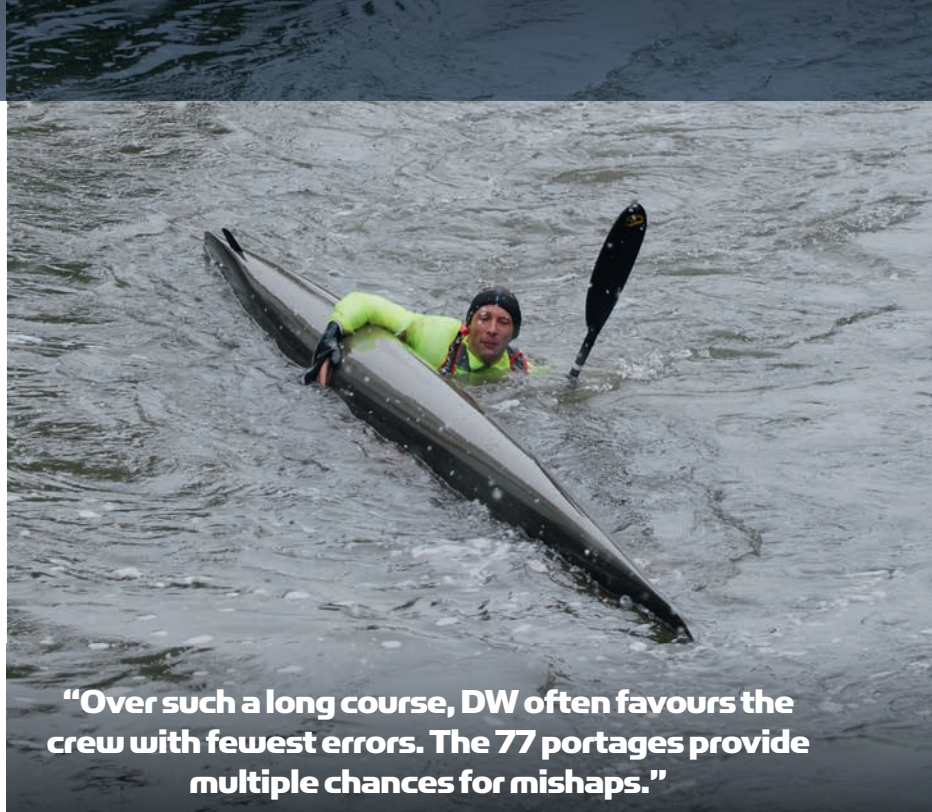
PORTAGE PRACTICE

Over such a long course, DW often favours the crew with fewest errors. The 77 portages provide multiple chances for mishaps. Ellie Walker, teaming up with Peter Walker to win the Junior / Veteran race in 2013, says, "Practice and run". It's a well-held and frequent view of successful teams that portages are the easiest place to waste time, lose momentum and halt progress.

Taking part in the Waterside and Thameside series, incorporating much of the course, is one of the best ways of developing course knowledge for the novice crew. Shuna Braithwaite, half of the highest performing female crew for the last three years, worked through the bits Waterside and Thameside left out as part of their course preparation.

KIT, FOOD AND DRINK

These are critical to DW performance. Experiment with kit, food and drink to find out what works for you. Kit should keep you comfortable and warm. Food should stay in your stomach when you're being active. Try out different fluids to see what you're comfortable with over a long period of time whilst exercising. You'll get tips, but you need to find out what is the best combination for you. Louis Allen calls it, "Trial and error"; Stuart West says, "It's personal"; Ellie Walker proves the point recommending, "Ham sandwiches with a white chocolate button and a jelly baby."



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PRE RACE PREPARATION

Your support crew won't paddle your boat, but a poorly prepared support team will seriously affect your performance. Pick a crew with a mix of paddling experience and course knowledge. Paul Hayes suggests, "Choosing a support team that get on with the people in the boat" as key to building team spirit. Stuart West says briefing and supporting at Waterside D are the best race preparation your support crew can get. Adding that apologising before the race for the inevitable moments of rudeness may be a good idea.

A frequent message from race organisers is to get your entry in early and read the rules, which includes details of essential kit.

Peter Walker suggests taking spares, in particular a rudder packed under your seat, and booking good accommodation along the course if you're on the four-day race, in addition to accommodation in Devizes before the start of the race. Peter also suggests checking and re-checking your schedule to make sure you hit the outgoing tide at Teddington at the right time.

RACE DAY

Arriving at Devizes Wharf after a seamless and stress free preparation, you're free to set off. With a foundation of solid training and preparation, confidence, tried and tested kit, positive attitude in the boat and your well-prepared support crew, it's the simple matter of 90,000 odd paddle strokes between Wiltshire and success at Westminster. Shuna Braithwaite makes it more digestible, "Break it down to which portage is next and stick to the endurance race tip, having tested in your training, never do anything different in the race."

Good luck. You can do it. **CF**

Using Waterside A to prepare.

USEFUL INFO

For more information visit www.dwrace.org.uk or look for Devizes to Westminster International Canoe Race on Facebook.