

YOUR CRUISING STORIES

Sam Griffiths is housemaster of Ingram's Hall, Shrewsbury School. He grew up in Scotland where summers were spent sailing and climbing.



The Shrewsbury School team sailed on the Swan 46, *Gertha 5*



Running down Snowdon, the first land stage of the Three Peaks challenge

In the spirit of Tilman

Sam Griffiths and his team of pupils take part in the 2022 Three Peaks Yacht Race



The boats crossing the start line at Barmouth

The whole of Barmouth was out, the band was playing, even the sun was making an appearance; the 44th Three Peaks Yacht Race was about to begin. And this year it was extra special: two school teams, Shrewsbury and Sedbergh were entering for the first time. With six pupils each, two adult sailors and an adult runner or two, we would enter the Challenge Class which allows engines. While this would help them at times of no wind and an adverse tide, the jury was still out as to just how long it would take such youngsters to cover the gruelling land legs.

A fresh westerly breeze had picked up as the yachts vied for position across the start line before the teams were released across Cardigan Bay; the five-day-plus adventure had started in earnest! Surrounded by stunning views, we were even able to see the grandeur of Snowdon far to the north, the summit of which was our goal in the

morning. For now, though, we had to inch past the great tidal headland that is the Llŷn Peninsula. Yachts come in close here, hoping for a back eddy to propel them around the corner before they can be somewhat released north-east towards Anglesey. The light was now fading but we had a fast point of sail for Simon Ridley's Swan 46, *Gertha 5*, that he had so kindly agreed to skipper for us. A sailor of vast experience, he'd even completed the race before and was joined by the similarly capable Malcolm Corcoran.

CREEPING OVER CAERNARFON

Creeping over Caernarfon Bar at 0430, the engine went on, only for it to feel like an eternity for us to reach the dock. The runners climbed the pier for the obligatory kit check, before trotting through the sleepy streets; our Snowdon 'nearly marathon' of 24 miles had begun. Oscar Dickins, Ed Scott, Tim Strebel and Hamish Griffiths were with

me. By the time we turned left up the Watkins Path, we were already going slower when in the sanctuary of the shady sections. We summited, and quickly turned downhill, letting gravity help us as we tried to stay ahead. We stepped up to a furious pace along the busy road back to Caernarfon, just reaching the boat in a run of just under four hours. This ensured that we could just creep through the Menai Strait with inches to spare. We were relieved to hoist sail at Puffin Island, knowing that our first country, Wales, was now behind us.

The earliest we could get into the lock at Whitehaven was 0700 Monday morning and so a leisurely lunch was rustled up. *Gertha 5* was soon becalmed though and the engine was resorted to as we made our steady way north through the Irish Sea and the accompanying darkness. Dodging offshore wind farms became our main excitement as copious amounts of pasta was consumed and an early and calm night's sleep was had.

Anchoring off Whitehaven for a couple of hours, we were eventually let in, side by side with Sedbergh, but with two very different game plans for the daunting 53-mile bike/run ahead. We chose to use the full 12-hour cycle and give our entire team a run out, thus Anna Booker and Sophie Whiteman joined us. Finally, on our mountain bikes, we rode towards the fells and were soon blown away by the beauty of Elterwater.

Locking up the bikes at the Black Sail Youth Hostel and ascending the pass, we were somewhat taken aback by the length of the descent into Wasdale Head; by the time we reached this checkpoint we had been going four hours and we had not yet started climbing Scafell Pike. The almost absurd splendour of the Lakes couldn't quite disguise the feeling that we would not make it back in time for the 1900 tide.

After riding and running for eight hours, we were starving; we made a stop for a sandwich and a Coke at the Wasdale Head Inn. This might have tarnished the image of



The teams have to sail from Barmouth to Fort William via Caernarfon and Whitehaven

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hardened mountaineers and sailors, but it did wonders for morale, and we returned to the boat exactly 12 hours after we set out.

But the nature of this famous old race is one of highs and lows. As we chased down Sedbergh's pacy monohull, all the hours in the sun and the confused sea off the Mull of Galloway saw some succumb to the dreaded mal de mer. By 1000 Tuesday we had made it past the final headland that was the Mull of Kintyre. The Mordor-esque views of the Paps of Jura soon mesmerised us as the wind held enough for us to stem the last of the ebb through the potentially boat-stopping tidal gates of Fladda. Our mood continued to rise as, abreast



A tired but happy Shrewsbury School team after sailing 389 miles, cycling 40 miles and running 55 miles

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of Kerrera, we knew the magic carpet that was now the flooding tide would take us all the way up the ever-narrowing Loch Linnhe to our final port of call: Fort William.

BE GENTLE, BEN

At first light on Wednesday, it was clear that the hot weather was no longer. News of freezing conditions on 'The Ben', coupled with Sedbergh's now 27-minute lead was enough to see us belting along Corpach's tow path. Spirits rose though as we snatched a glimpse of Sedbergh having their compulsory summit photo taken.

Although we overtook them when they'd stopped to strip off layers, they passed us again when we had to do the same! Clearly a dramatic climax to five days of non-stop racing was ahead and, with just two of the overall 18 miles to go, we were relieved to haul them in again and finally collapse exhausted across the finish line. This being the Challenge Class there are rightly no winners as the benefit of occasional engine use is impossible to quantify. It was therefore the happiest of comradeship that ensued as Sedbergh were applauded home: together our pupils had added another significant chapter to one of Britain's toughest and most historic adventure races.



The rivals - Sedbergh School on their Sun Fast 3600, Panache

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Andy Sanderson