

Devizes Westminster Training

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Devizes to Westminster Canoe Race: described as the *Longest, hardest, most challenging* non-stop Canoe Race in the world. It is 125miles long and has 77 Portages, it is on Canal River and Tidal Water it goes overnight and just to add a bit more flavour, it is held at Easter, which is not the most ideal time for weather and water conditions

So, with all this in front of you how do you train for such an event?

To do the race successfully at senior level non-stop in K2 is a team effort. This team is not just the crew in the boat, but the support crews, the coaches and all those involved in the months of winter training prior to the race and yes it is months required for training especially if the paddlers taking part do not have much of a background in Marathon Racing and paddling K2's

To do well, and this does not mean winning necessarily or finishing in the top 3, it means taking on the challenge and completing it, setting a time target and achieving it, even just doing the race to finish, still means having a target time to achieve and sticking to a schedule. There is a tide to catch at Teddington, missing this means the end of the race as, after over 100 miles the chance of pushing through an incoming tide is quite slim.

I first got involved in DW, way back in 1971 when Richmond Canoe Club decided to take advantage of a relaxation in the support crew rules and go for winning the event, Up to then it had been very much to the advantage of 'Services Crews' with the support they could muster for their paddlers. To cut a long story short, we were something like 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th in the Race and won the Team event by quite a margin, the first 'Civvy' crew to do so for a while.

What I learnt then, under the guidance of Roland Lawler in particular and others and what I have learned during the years that have passed since then in terms of training, paddling technique and following the race, I had a chance to put into practice when approached by two female paddles from Loughborough University Canoe Club about two years ago. They wanted to take part and they wanted to win the University Trophy for being the fastest Student crew



As far as being marathon paddlers was concerned, they were nothing special, one was a GB Wild Water Racing Paddler and the other had completed the race as a Junior and in the Endeavour Event. Both could paddle a K2 together, but only one was happy in a K1 at the start of the training.

Training started about October before the race, a discussion was had about expectations, the level of success that was being sought. And the commitment that was needed to achieve what they wanted.

To start with they both had to learn to paddle with good, sound technique and be able to maintain that technique to keep the boat running efficiently throughout the whole duration of the race. A lot of work was done in the early training sessions on sitting in the boat correctly with good posture and good connectivity and developing a good efficient paddling technique, The work on technique never stopped all the way through, every session, no matter what else was being done, always had an element that concentrated on technique, when the technique started to break down, the effort was reduced until it came back again. In the first period of training up to Christmas, the Paddling Ergo was a much used tool in training for establishing good technique, maintaining it and then working on developing it even further. During this time training sessions were held on and off the water. A lot was done on the regatta course at Holme Pierrepont where times could be taken on consistent water in order to monitor progress and start to look at what sort of time could be achieved.



As soon as the crew was ready in terms of technique, boat confidence and ability, then training commenced on the River Trent, steadily increasing the distance and the pace, whilst not forgetting the all important points of posture and connectivity in the boat as well as technique. From a race specific point of view, there are locks that can be portaged on the Trent that are quite similar to those on the Kennet and Avon Canal and the

River Thames. Practice on these was a very important element at this stage. Any problems in the portaging were resolved back at Holme Pierrepont where there are a lot of options for different types of portage (high, low, wet or dry). Again times were logged all the time to see how the crew were faring and what times they could expect to achieve. It was beginning to become evident towards the end of the year that a good time was seemingly possible and that there may be more to aim for than just the Student prize.

As the year came to an end and the New Year approached, Circuit Training with Nottingham Kayak Club commenced, this involved 2 sessions a week with running, aerobic body weight exercises and basketball included. This was a vital part of building up the endurance over the winter, especially when it wasn't always possible to paddle.

The mileage increase involved steadily increasing the distance paddled, or at least the time out on the water to up to 5 hours at a time, sessions were done in the evening, in the dark, as the night paddling during the race was going to play a large significant part.

When time and weather suited, as much training was done over weekends on the actual race course itself, this involved using the Waterside and Thames Series' of races for important rehearsal time, where this didn't cover every part of the race course, then specific sessions were done on the those parts of the Canal or the Thames. In the end every part of the Race course was paddled, except for the final section from Putney to Westminster. The parts of the course that were to be done in the dark were either paddled in the dark or every portage inspected in the dark, A fundamental part of the preparation for the race was to rehearse the maximum amount possible and become familiar with every part of the race in the conditions it was going to be raced in. At the same time as the course was being practiced, all these training sessions were valuable testing times for equipment, clothing, and especially food and drink. This was both in terms of Systems used for drinking, the type of food and drink that was consumed, the frequency of consumption, everything that takes place in the race was tried, tested and rehearsed before the event.

In the end the race preparation was successful, the girls achieved their original goal, in fact overtook the male opposition going for the Universities prize, they also won the Women's event in the second fastest time ever, they also finished in under 20 hours. A fantastic achievement especially as the weather overnight was one on the worst on record.

Another very important factor in the race is the training and preparation of the support crews. This is a separate topic on its own and is covered in *Devizes to Westminster Race – A Checklist*.