Four Peaks Race

Can you think of a better way to spend a weekend . . . drenched to the skin, frozen by the wind and rain, tossed about in a small boat, scrambling up a muddy track in the middle of the night . . . well this is what the Four Peaks Race is all about.

The Four Peaks is a race that attracts people who think they relish a challenge and then tests them to their limits. One of only a handful of its kind to include sailing and orientation, the Four Peaks is one of the most demanding sporting events in Asia. Organised by the Aberdeen Boat Club (ABC), it is held annually before Chinese New Year and attracts sailors and runners primarily from Hong Kong. To complete this race requires commitment, dedication and physical toughness . . .

18 yachts in the 18th year

On Saturday, the 24th of January 2002, 18 yachts set off from Tai Tam Bay in conditions that could best be described as "grim". Cold, wet and cloudy, it stayed that way for the rest of the day and for most of the next.

With a northerly of around 8 knots, the fleet rounded a windward mark and headed for Sai Kung and the first peak — Ma On Shan (702m). Facing some of the worst weather in the event's 18-year history, the yachts made heavy going of the first leg. Race spokesman, Martin Quaile, summed it up by saying: "We had pretty bad conditions with low ground air temperatures, low cloud, rain, variable wind speeds and lack of moonlight which all added to the difficulties for the participants."

This is a race that depends on so many factors — physical endurance, skilful sailing, good running and most of all preparation. The sailing takes between 15 and 24 hours while the running anything from five to eight hours. Over the years, the order of the peaks has changed but this year followed last — after Ma On Shan, Violet Hill (433m) near Repulse Bay, followed by Mt Stenhouse (353m) on Lamma Island and finally Lantau Peak (934m) on Lantau Island. For the shorter course boats, the order included Po Toi Peak after Ma On Shan and no Lantau ascent.

Determination off Cheung Sha Beach (top), disaster (middle), the start (above) and elation (below)

Opinions vary on the most difficult legs and toughest peaks but getting in and out of Port Shelter invariably poses problems and, over the years, Mt Stenhouse has notched up a steady toll on runners losing their way over the tricky terrain.

Preparation and tactics

According to Jack Mallee, skipper of *Kam Loong* (the Division A winner, and first boat over the line) the race is won or lost on good preparation and tactics.

"Familiarisation with the peaks, paths and drop-off areas is crucial. Preparing a number of options before the race that allow for changes of wind and weather conditions is also critical. It's not the fastest runners that win the race — seamanship and sailing ability make the difference. Setting down at the wrong drop-off point can cost you a lot of time. Do you drop off at the nearest point to give the runners less distance to run or do you drop off and pick up at the best location for wind to the next peak? These are questions you are constantly asking yourself."

Stephen Hilton, skipper of *Ragamuffin*, Division B, summed the race up by point out that " . . . conditions were very challenging. It was as bad as sailing in the South Atlantic — rain coming at you sideways! Mind you, after we left Ma On Shan, and apart from the cold and poor visibility, it was great sailing and the crew really played their part."

Ariki III, skippered by Graeme Large, found itself short of crew — an entire crew — a week before the race. There was no time to prepare or survey the course, but with some experienced sailors and runners (who'd taken part in the Action Asia Challenge the weekend before) *Ariki* made very good time. For Graeme — at 72 the oldest competitor in the race — this was his best Four Peaks in 13 years. "We had a north wind all weekend, and although I can't see a thing at night, and *Ariki* has no radar — we had a bloody good sail!"

Emily Chan, one of eight women in the race, helms *Rhapsody* (above) and some even found it funny (below)

Despite the conditions, only one boat retired. *Getafix* split the top of its mast during the last leg near Lamma Island at 4.00am on Sunday morning. A big disappointment for the crew so near to the finish. *Kam Loong* made it home at 5.30am, well ahead of the next boat to cross the line, *Rhapsody*, skippered by Emily Chan, which got in four hours later after completing the short course. This year was considered a "fast year", as the last boat was made it in before 2.00pm on the Sunday, many hours earlier than last year's race. There are records of boat coming in on Monday . . .

Chicken surprise Hearing on the radio of a budding chef cooking up a delicious supper of chicken surprise, a cold, wet and hungry volunteer on one of the peaks was heard to say: "Chicken surprise? The only surprise I have had tonight is no chicken!"

Lost on Stenhouse Five runners from one boat tackled Mt Stenhouse but only one got to the checkpoint.

Dad and son A 16-year-old ran two peaks with his father then slept all the way to the finish line.

Through the bushes onto Cheung Sha Beach

Fourteen San Miguel's Word got out that Jon Zinke, peak controller on Ma On Shan wanted a beer or two to get him through the long, lonely night. By midnight he had 14 San Migs provided by understanding runners.

To sum up, the competitors interviewed on the dock afterwards, or in the warmth of the control room, it had been well worth the effort. All agreed the weather was appalling but all pointed to the excellent race management by the ABC. Having done it 18 times, the club has it down to a fine art.

Any other masochists or madmen out there who fancy a challenge next January should get in touch with the ABC for next year's Four Peaks Race (2552 8182).

And the winners of the 2002 Four Peaks Race race were:

Line Honours
Division A — *Kam Loong*
(Jack Mallee)

Line Honours
Division B — *Rhapsody*
(Emily Chan)

First on corrected time
Division A — *Kam Loong*
(Jack Mallee)

First on corrected time
Division B — *Ragamuffin*
(Stephen Hilton)

Stories told after the race

Illegal immigrants The marine police had been informed of a landing of II's on an island south of Hong Kong. Seeing *Ariki* anchored off Po Toi, a launch approached and hailed the sole occupant. The questioning went something like this:

"Excuse me sir, did you land some people on Po Toi Island tonight?"

"Yes, officer, five people."

"And were they Chinese?"

"No, officer, there were two New Zealanders, a Scotsman, a Dutchman and a South African."

"Thank you sir, have a good evening."