Chesterton Petty FOUR PEAKS RACE

Rule changes to broaden appeal

The Four Peaks Race is a multi-sport event comprising sailing, hill climbing and kayaking, with this year again showing how important kayaking skills can be. On top of this, tactics and strategy both play a significant part and can be affected by the simplest of rule changes — these also serve to keep competitors on their toes.

This year the major change was to exempt three crew from running a peak rather than one. Some feel that the race is losing its uniqueness by this 'softening' of the rules. However safety, and the need for experience on board, was behind many of the changes this year. One amendment was to extend the course for Division A around SE Soko Island, and another to return the finish line to Middle Island. Both were to satisfy the sailors who feel the sailing sections of the race are too short and the latter to make life more comfortable for the poor souls on the finish boat. Perhaps a daylight finish is now ensured?

Some further minor changes were made. Well, to at least one entrant, these were not so minor. *Trilogy HK* has not returned to the race since the 2000 event when skipper, Malcolm Brocklebank objected to the interpretation of certain of the hill climbing instructions and in particular the operation of the scrutineering clauses and penalties for infringement. Long time readers will remember his letter *When is a protest not . . .* in the February 2000 issue of Fragrant Harbour. For the 2001 event, the penalty for not sending two runners up each hill was increased and more discretion was given to the race committee in the event of infringements. Brocklebank still considered this insufficient. This year the race committee issued an L-Notice to address further related issues at the last minute. One was for peak controls to advise runners of any non-compliance with the scrutineering checks. As a result, the marshals used a 'check-list' during each scrutineering exercise in true QA fashion. And, this year, *Trilogy HK* returned to the start line.

Back down to Cheung Sha (top), *Roxanne* (above) and pushing off Cheung Sha Beach (bottom)

The mood was sombre as race committee chairman, Barry Hill, kicked off Friday night's race briefing with a forecast of light winds. Race officer, Arnold Lunty, followed this with a mention of "a minimum 4 knots" and use of the words "postponement" and "abandonment". There were many glum faces around the room.

A glance at the entry list showed numbers much the same as recent years. Names much the same with newcomers *Shogun's Pride*, *Spirit of Outward Bound Hong Kong* and *Little Sunshine*. *Spirit of Outward Bound* is an ex-BT Challenge yacht and is the Outward Bound's new training vessel. It is also their first entry since 1999 and 2000 when their open-decked luggers competed. Regrettably *Tipsy Free* did not return and neither did *Windseeker*. With John Blay's retirement, *Windseeker's* experienced team of runners found an alternative in the X-99 *Roxanne*, with new owner Peter McCaffery. Joining them from the X-99s was *Dexter* sharing crew from the Impala, *Taxi*. And out were X-99s *Getafix* and *Fox in Soxs*, both regulars for the last few years. IRC Class I ended up with five entries and HKPN Class II six.

On Saturday, the 29th of January, approaching the start at Tai Tam, crews of the 17 entries were surprised to find a good breeze blowing. A very relieved RO saw the fleet off at 1100 in a 70° wind of 8-10 knots. His caution of the evening before appeared thrown to the wind because the long course was signalled for both divisions. But as boats were still focused on the windward mark some half a mile distant, the visibility was closing in for only the second time in the history of the race.

And this meant Fury Rocks in poor visibility! Leaving the cliffs of Cape d'Aguilar behind, boats set off on a beat into what hill runners would describe as a whiteout. This gave everyone an immediate test of their navigation skills. Visibility was generally considered to be 200 metres or less, but there was one consolation — this year, the weather was mild.

The first casualty was *Ariki III*. Having been ushered around the windward mark by the ABC Commodore in the start boat, Graeme Large found himself off d'Aguilar playing 'Blind Man's Bluff' with the coastal shipping. "After two too-close-for-comfort calls with shipping wandering unlit and without sound signals, I decided that enough was enough. However, I'll be back!" said Large.

For the bigger boats with radar, navigation was not a big deal. But for others not so. The Impala *Pied Piper* took the great circle route (going close in to Sun Kong) to avoid Fury Rocks. In fact most expressed considerable concern. *Roxanne* reported several stressful minutes while a ship was turning in Tathong Channel near TCS2. "The vessel finally gave five long blasts and almost immediately, we saw a dark stripe on the hull of a passenger ship looming out of the fog and thankfully passing us on our port side. I have endured scary times at sea in gales and big seas, but this experience must rate as the most harrowing in my sailing career," said McCaffery. A number of yachts questioned the decision, some in very strong words, to set the long course involving Fury Rocks with light winds forecast and in limited visibility.

Inevitably, the wind died on approaching Shelter Island, but the visibility did improve shortly after dark. Several boats dropped their runners early, but catamaran *Zuma* managed to sail into Sai Kung and claimed fastest time for Ma On Shan. Meanwhile, the Impalas were struggling. Both *Pied Piper* and *Shikari* carried dinghies or inflatable kayaks for the race and needed to go well into the drop zone. Considerable frustration set in amongst both teams of runners and both boats had retired by 2100. *Pied Piper* went on to land its runners in Hebe Haven so they could vent some of their frustration by running part way up Ma On Shan! With its runners coming near to mutiny in 2003 and now 2005, *Pied Piper* suggested that enthusiasm for the race could best be maintained if a running section was thrown in near the start of the race.

Shogun's Pride also retired in Port Shelter citing safety reasons. But runners from 12 boats did make it to the summit of Ma On Shan, with the last one, *Trilogy HK*, arriving just before midnight only to find that Peak Control had already gone home! Further frustration was suffered getting out into the breeze beyond Table and predictably, boats were by now transferring to the Motoring Division including both cats, *Ate* and *Zuma*.

Start in Tai Tam (above) and Sita powers up (above right)

Kam Loong and *Wizard* commenced their tussle on the way in towards Stanley. There was little to choose between these two lead boats up and down Violet Hill and they had both picked up their runners and left before the next boat, *Roxanne,* had arrived. This continued all the way down to the turning point at SE Soko. From Stanley onwards, the wind was holding at a consistent 10 knots from behind, perfect X-99 conditions — broad reaching in 10+ knots of breeze with flat water. With spinnaker flying, *Roxanne* was gaining steadily on the leaders and going in to Cheung Sha Beach, was little more than one and a half hours behind. There was no 'big blow' at Cheung Sha this year, so there were few problems putting runners ashore.

By this time, the RO had made the decision to shorten the course at Cheung Chau Rock, so reducing the race to three peaks. *Wizard* was only minutes behind the leader *Kam Loong*, leaving Cheung Sha and the two match-raced all the way to the finish with *Kam Loong* snatching line honours at 11:36:51. Meanwhile, *Roxanne* found a lift up the Cheung Chau shoreline, but little did the crew realise how much they had gained until they went to the race control room at the ABC to complete their race declaration form. It was sufficient to put them in contention for 1st yacht in Div A on corrected time. *Spirit of Outward Bound*, the last boat to finish, only just made the line before the 1800 cut off.

Some disappointment was expressed at the decision to shorten the course. Perhaps better ways to shorten could be explored to allow all four hills to be completed. After all, the race IS all about the FOUR peaks.

The Div B course had been reduced to three peaks only this year with the omission of Po Toi. Only two boats continued and finished, but how intensely competitive the racing always is in this division. This time, *Rhapsody* was up against newcomer *Little Sunshine*. The two of them were neck and neck over the water (and hills) from Repulse Bay right up to the finish line. *Rhapsody*, helmed by Emily Chan, came out on top by virtue of its crew's overall running strength, Chan's third win since first entering in 2001. There was consolation for *Little Sunshine* as they were fastest on the Violet Hill run for the sailing divisions.

The Four Peaks race has lasting appeal to a small group of yachts. By allowing three non-runners this year, it was hoped that it would have more appeal particularly to larger yachts. Did this rule change perhaps go unnoticed because the entry of 17 yachts was much the same as in recent years? What is perhaps lacking, is a really hard sell exercise by the organisers. Why not think about bringing in a PR company that specialises in sports events?

Also, by offering the sponsors more would give it greater appeal — look at the Standard Chartered marathon. More media coverage attracts more entries and more entries provide more exposure for the sponsor. How about some TV coverage on one of the adventure channels?