

Drifting across the start line (below) and raising the kite on *Andiamo* (middle)



Four, less one, Peaks Race The Aberdeen Boat Club worked wonders sorting out a re-run for this year's Simpson Marine Four Peaks Race. Finding slots in Hong Kong's over-stuffed sailing calendar — leave alone ones that also fit the Agriculture, Fisheries & Conservation Department (AFCD) booking sheet for Country Park access — is a nightmare.

Just five weeks after the original schedule was blown out to sea by an icy blast of Force 8 winds, 12 boats drifted around the Tai Tam starting area praying for wind.

"It's like the Med," said one sailor. "Too much or zilch."

The forecast was double-plus ungood. Light winds and calms from every which where for all of Saturday, the 27th, and Sunday, the 28th of February 2016.

"No decision on shortening the course until midday Sunday," the race committee chairman, Tristan Stewart, had warned at the skippers' briefing on the Friday evening before the race.

It was going to be a long, frustrating battle.

Ten minutes after the start gun had fired for Divisions A1 and A2, most of the eight competitors were still struggling to get over the line and the B Division start had had to be postponed.

For race veteran boat, Stephen Hilton's Taipan 28, *Ragamuffin*, Div B's four-boat start came too late because a spreader on his wooden mast had broken off during the pre-start manoeuvres.

The crawl was on.

For the newer, lighter boats, there was always

just about enough wind to keep moving, although the strong ebb tide that swept in when everyone was creeping past south of Lamma Island promptly divided the fleet into two. Out front were *Red Kite II*, *Blackjack* and, just clinging to their heels, *Tolo* and *Andiamo*. Then came the pack.

It wasn't until late afternoon that the *Red Kite*'s runners made it to Lantau Peak, hotly pursued by the *Blackjacks*. As *Tolo* crept in some time after sunset, teeth ground as they saw the lights of *Red Kite II* and *Blackjack* creeping seawards.

This was sloooooow. Retirements mounted.

Tolo was underway again by 0123 on Sunday morning, leaving *Andiamo* still waiting for its runner. By that time, *Cuchulain* had thundered in, having decided to shift to the motoring division, and four or five other boats were at anchor or in the offing. Tristan Stewart, realizing there was no way anyone was going to make it to a fourth peak — especially in Sai Kung — wisely (and very kindly) announced that the course would be shortened to the summit of Violet Hill on Hong Kong Island, the third peak, for all divisions.

The fickle weather kept up its games during the small hours, giving those lucky enough to be in southern Hong Kong waters three hours of steady Force 3 northerlies before, again, shutting down and repeating Saturday's fitful and evanescent puffs.

Philippe

Delorme and his crew on *Red Kite II* put in a brilliant race in incredibly testing conditions, finishing at 0406 on Sunday morning. They were hotly pursued by Glenn Smith's *Blackjack* less than half an hour later. At 0606, still just hanging on to the leading pack, came *Tolo*'s runners, skipper Jon Cannon and long distance, hill-running maven, Alex Orange (who featured on our February 1992 cover). The remaining four boats trickled in slowly over the course of a long, long Sunday morning.



The leading boats had shown that, whatever the winds, the Four Peaks Race is a challenge of endurance, skill, cunning and smart tactics.

But the biggest challenge proved to be for the poor souls manning the peak controls. Lantau Peak had expected to be done and dusted well before sundown, not hanging in until the small hours. Lamma's Mt Stenhouse had expected their first business by late afternoon and for it all to be over by midnight or so . . . not nearer midday the next day. Teeth



Blackjack's runner at Lantau gate (left) and *Red Kite II's* runners coming ashore at Cheung Sha Beach (above)

chattered. Supplies and water ran out . . . but runners were nonetheless met with a smile.

It was tough for everyone. Chapeaux all round.