

I'd sworn that I would never get back in one of those things again, fortunately, things turned out very different. Race report to follow.....

With a decade of super - rafting behind me Clair persuaded me to have a go at dragonboating in a local charity event. I did one training session, on the local reservoir run by the local team (Coventry Dragons). The helm / trainer told us to sit to the centre of the boat, as "it would make it rock more if we didn't". We did one circuit, at various degrees of pressure. The thumb and fingers of my outer hand were battered and bruised from them hitting the gunnel. "Don't get that problem on rafts.....I'm not getting back in one of those f\*\*\*\*ing things again" says me.

Clair does the actual event and really enjoyed it. That was 6 years ago, in the millennium year. There were no more events locally, and rafting took up a lot of time so we did no more dragonboating until last September, when, by chance we met Pam. We were doing a raft race at Tring in Hertfordshire and needed another crew member. Pam volunteered and we were doing well until our rudder broke.....but that's another story.....

Clair mentioned to Pam that she would like another go at dragonboating and Pam arranged for Clair to paddle with Millwall DB at the national championships. They were desperate for more paddlers, so I gave in and joined in, Georgia drummed and our other daughter Kara also paddled along with some of our raft crew to join in as well. These guys don't get you to sit in the middle.....you don't smash your hands up on the gunnel..... you get knackered in a short space of time, paddling as hard as you can, but spend your time with a great bunch of people. Hmm....maybe we should look at this some more....

We spend the winter training and racing with Secklow 100, our nearest competitive club, and we had a good time with them. During this time I managed to have a go on the GB Contenders boat at Henley and we started to get big ideas about going for the national teams..... Clair wasn't happy though – it was her sport not mine, and "it wasn't fair" that I'd been on a GB (contenders) boat and won a medal.....nearly had a domestic there....

We attended GB training sessions and things were looking good. We then decided that we needed to move clubs. BA were the clear choice. We knew people on the team and that felt that they had a really good balance between being competitive and having fun. We thought that they also seemed to have a really good team spirit. (We were right)

Stockton, Nottingham and Exeter events have come and gone and we've enjoyed every one. Now we had London (Thames DB). For the first time Clair and I are not the first at the venue (even Secklow got there before us),

Les (aka Mary Poppins), walks around with an umbrella to shade him from the sun, pleased that Amethus and Batchworth are debating things with the race officials. Jim also paraded with an umbrella – a lovely pink number! He was to be found asleep in his deck chair on the back of the truck in the shade from his 'parasol' between races (when not wearing rather fetching lampshades as headgear)

Some people are not happy with the race format. 100m sprints to start with! It takes ages getting the boats lined up on the start line. Some teams are clearly trying to take advantage. This could get tricky.....

This was the first event where we have been treated to so many sideshows – aircraft taking off / landing (a pain in the neck for starting officials) ... "Can't be one of ours.....it's still got all it's wheels" jokes one BA.

Later on there's a helicopter doing stunts and towards the end of the afternoon two formula 1 cars racing up and down the runway which is beside the river. "Now they're sending out a pace vehicle for us"

The 100m sprints are frantic and we are not happy with our performance, missing out on the finals. "Never mind" says Kevin, "let's forget that lot and get back to our usual routine. We have a strong crew and should do well".

The weather changed from sunny and warm to thunder and rain. Those umbrellas came in really useful. The ladies race took place during the downpour. Our team consisted of 10 BA ladies and 10 from Secklow. Whilst the men where sheltering under gazebos and umbrellas the women battled against 3 other teams, Thames amazons, Amathus and Batchworth Aspire Juniors.

Then the serious racing starts, with the 200m events.

BA get into their stride and begin to perform well. Our starts are getting better each time. Batchworth turn up late for the one of the qualifying rounds. The starter says that she'll start without them. "Suddenly this could be the most important race of the day" quips Mr Randal..... but then she relents and lets them race. Despite beating BA to the finish line though, they incur a time penalty which puts BA straight through to the 200m Major Final. Batchworth have to be content with the minor final.....oh dear!!.....not what we have come to expect from them.

In the final of the 200m we are beaten into 5<sup>th</sup> place. Our stroke isn't happy – his hand slipped on his shaft at least 3 times – never had that problem before - has anyone got any wax? (Is this the right script? – best get back to the race report.....).

In the 500 heats we face Batchworth again. We come what we think is a close second to them, but, having taken the pressure off too soon we get pipped by Henley and miss out on the major final. You can't afford to do that if you want to win..... .

Save the best to last so they say..... We did.  
We were in the Minor Final, up against our friends at WAM and Cool Runnings, Been nip and tuck with WAM all season, but , having missed out so narrowly on the major final, we were intent on making a clear statement...

From the start we had power and we had technique. We had control and boat speed was as quick as we could go. We stormed off the line, getting a clear lead.

Jim could hardly control himself.  
"You're in control"..... wicked!

You could hear the calls of the other teams to pick up the pace, but that just confirmed that they were behind us.....

Jim gave a call at about half way to push it on. The power came. We were not going to ease off. We kept our focus.

Jim called for the line and again the boat surged forward at even greater speed.

We crossed the line, and didn't take the pressure off until Jim said so, at which point we all but collapsed. We looked around to see if someone had sneaked up on us, but no, we really were a full boat length ahead.

Did we give our all?..... Yes

Was the timing good?..... Yes

Did the boat run smoothly..... Yes

Did we panic?..... No

Did we lose our technique?..... No

Would we falter? .....No.

Did it feel good?..... **You bet it did!**

We'd missed out on at least one league point by not making the Major Final, but we had the boost of a convincing win in our last race.

Talking to Malcolm later, he revealed that in a matter of a few weeks he's gone from supporter / spectator, to having a go, to really missing it when not competing. That says a heck of a lot about the sport and the team that you race with.

The major final was a stormer, with Thames, Amethus and Batchworth going head to head. Thames took the race for the first time this season, with Amethus coming in a close second. Batchworth were a third of a boat length down at the end, but then came the protest. Amethus were awarded time penalties for wash hanging on Thames with the result that they were demoted to 3<sup>rd</sup> place. I have to say, the race venue had a very wide race course. There's no reason why any crew should get so close to another team at this event.

We had a great day's racing with a fantastic last race, difficult to say which race was the most important race of the day though.

Now the league is wide open, with Amethus and Batchworth level on points (taking their top scores into account). Going to be an interesting finale to the season.

Next stop - Worcester. Dare you miss out?

AP