

Henley Winter Series 5?

If you've read my Henley report you'll be expecting something caustic that covers all the other teams as well as BA in contrast to the normal self serving papp that you see on some other sites, but sadly I am struggling to put the Cardiff race meeting into context so this might turn out to be as wet as everyone else's offerings; for which I apologise.

We haven't started training yet and there was ice on the car when I came out at 6am so obviously after dropping Indra and her luggage at Heathrow (the luggage may well still be there) it was a bit of a shock to hurtle (at 50mph because of the roadworks) past J8/9 and on west to Cardiff. Nice easy journey, passed the boat at about J27 but arrived after it. Must get a map from Jim for next year.

None of the usual chaos getting boats in the water, maybe because there was some in the dock; unusually we could step into the boat rather than abseiling down as we have done in previous years. The sun was shining and all seemed set fair for a lovely day. Thank goodness I didn't bother with sun screen or I'd have a serious paranoia problem later in the day.

Off we go in race 4 with Will, a guest from Florida (he must have suffered in the afternoon) Stuart, Rosie and Sam all making their debuts (sorry Sam if you paddled last year and I forgot) to make a total of 5 juniors in the boat; they are very tidy and paddle well above their weight. Sam had the largest personal following of any dragonboater ever and he was not even a little embarrassed by their loud cheers, or his mother's video skills. The first 15 strokes saw Bristol stay with us, but from stroke 16 it was "Adios Bristol" as we got into a lovely stride. How people on the bank thought we were 3rd when our six seat was level with their head I don't know; perspective distortion I guess. We might have paddled well, but we were beaten by the most senior of three Amathus crews. If everyone could build clubs like they do, then dragonboating could take over the world. As per normal, Batchworth was the fastest crew and they didn't look as if they were trying.

In the reps we faced the Severn Warriors and the Amathus Wasps (3rd team) and were well clear after the start sequence. Easy paddle through to make the semis.

The semis saw us against Thames, Amathus Bees (their club was in 17 out of 30 races so no surprise they have been in all of ours so far) and Worcester (who have recently returned to their former home, but as yet have not returned to their glory days – they used to be a red hot team and I look forward to seeing them back in the mix). Eyeballs out was called for and eyeballs out was got. Very fast rate, very hard work and very well deserved second place. Team hug afterwards and great jubilation, but not fast enough for the final and actually only 9th overall; but we enjoyed the race and felt good about ourselves.

Meanwhile West Ham had scored and Chelsea had a player sent off – though as it was only little fat Maniche that really didn't matter.

Batchworth won a four boat final quite convincingly.

With 10 man Chelsea now 2-1 up we set off for the 500m heats boosted by the not inconsiderable presence of Johnno from Brute Force. Rather irritatingly, and they have got form for this, Taniwhas arrived late which meant we were sitting in the middle a very cold and windy dock for far too long. They got a five second penalty which they were seriously miffed about, but the fine is in the rule book and the organisers did warn they would be getting tough. Anyway, with a five second advantage we thought we might as well give Thames a race. We got close, but not close enough. Meanwhile 10 man Chelsea had beaten West Ham 4-1.

We were not one of the fastest losers so off to the reps we went to line up against Excalibre, Henley Eyot and Secklow. I wouldn't say it was a stroll but I've never before heard Jim say "I'm not calling you to the line because I don't need to"; that cheered me up nearly as much as the football score. And by this time I think Wasps were ahead of the Scarlets at Twickenham.

The semis were a different kettle of fish (where was the fishing contest that they announced?) as without the muscular contribution of Johnno who had to leave early for some thumb related reason, we faced Amathus and Kingston. The problem I have with timed racing is that it is all so arbitrary. The timing is on a hand watch so can't be accurate and I don't for one minute believe every race starts from exactly the same place; I am sure that placing would be a fairer option. As we sat on the start line, hail pouring down on us and all three crews hunched up against the wind, Will mentioned that the only thing keeping him going was the fact that we were cold too and that he wasn't just a softie from a sunshine state; it wasn't much fun for us and must have been horrible for him. We did OK until about the 300m mark and then the tyre went out the back, the boat slowed, our strokes shortened and the last bit was hard work. We were beaten into 9th place and out of the minor final by less than half a second. But what gets my goat is the fact that Bees paddled in a flat calm and squeezed into the major final - what was Henley thinking about? – and dragged Powerblades to a time 5 seconds slower than our heat time and 3 seconds slower than our rep but fast enough for a minor final place. So the minor final had two teams that we should beat and the major final had one, the Bees, who trailed in 20 seconds behind the winners – Batchworth. The Batchworth scribe was impressed by the hard paddling of the Amathus senior crew, as I think we all were, but his geography is a bit out. Tykes come from Yorkshire and Liverpool isn't in Yorkshire.

The silver lining to being the only team not to have a final (this has happened to us before at Cardiff said Mr Paranoid) was the boat was off the water and loaded in double quick time, leaving us free for a couple of pints and a view of the second half of the ManUre v Arse match.

We had expected this to be a training day where the goal was smooth paddling and not much power, but we got a lot more power than anticipated, raced really well and enjoyed a great team atmosphere.

Next stop the salty waters of the Mersey by which time the Premier League title should be in its rightful home and we should be better conditioned and race ready.