

Geneva Aftermath

Written by Joe Oldak

Tuesday, 30 September 2008 09:32 - Last Updated Tuesday, 30 September 2008 09:54



Joe's report of the X-Press/City/Cantabs entry in the race around Lake Geneva.

Well - of the short distance they managed to row before sinking!

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It didn't start too well. Aside from the fact that we got up at 3am on Friday in order to get to the airport, security then took a dislike to the CO2 canisters in the life jackets we were taking, which resulted in two bags (mine and James') not arriving in Geneva. Finally the bags turned up about 10:30pm. Great, though after collecting them it was another late night we were hoping to do without!

We arrived at the Societe Nautique de Geneve [1] on Friday morning to register for the race and prepare our boat. This involved a trip to the Swiss equivalent of B&Q to buy equipment to make wave shields [2]. It was windy and the waves had white tops - a bad sign - far too choppy to row in. We also made a trip to the supermarket to buy about 10000 calories of food each, plus vast amounts of drinking water. We spent the rest of the day Friday preparing the boat and by the evening headed back to our nuclear bunker to sleep [3].

We arrived at the boathouse at 7am for the race, and the organisers looked anxious; the weather was still bad. Not as windy as Friday but the waves were still big near the start, though further round the lake it was reported to be calm. They had the option to postpone the race start to 2pm but, since the forecast didn't suggest things would change much, they went ahead with the race at 9am.

As is traditional with these things, you think you have plenty of time to prepare but always end up throwing things into the boat at the last minute in a panic to get into the water. Finally we did and had a lovely smooth paddle through the harbour to the start line. I was coxing first and managed not to crash into any of the expensive looking yachts. It seemed a bit wavy once out on the lake but no great problems.

A shotgun blast signalled the start and suddenly all 23 crews were racing across the lake towards the first buoy. It was around this time we really noticed the weather. Waves were getting through our DIY defences and so I started bailing. Unfortunately we hadn't really tested our bailing technique and the hand pump [4] we had brought along was soon struggling to keep up with the water coming in.

Round the first buoy, turning into the headwind, things went quickly downhill. Water was coming in more quickly than I could bail it and so Rob stopped rowing and chopped a water bottle in half to make two bailers. We continued bailing while the other three rowed on. By this time a few other boats had sunk and the crews had climbed onto support boats. This was also around the time that Rob noticed that our stern was getting dangerously close to the water level, if it went under we'd sink in seconds. We altered course to get closer to the bank, hoping to find smoother water. We didn't and so, realising we were just one or two large waves away from sinking completely, we pulled into the bank and jumped out.

We helped drag a few other sunken boats onto the bank before getting into a rescue boat back to the club house where they warmed us up with hot soup.

Within 30 minutes or so, around half the boats that started had sunk or abandoned. Although conditions cleared up later in the day, only five crews completed the race (out of 23 that started). All the crews that finished were:

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- a) very experienced - two crews had members who had completed the race over 20 times before
- b) kitted out with decent bilge pumps - one boat had two electric pumps, each of which could shift 150l/min
- c) German.



To mitigate their disappointment, Alan and Hamish decided to run the Geneva Marathon on Sunday, and James did the half. They all finished in one piece (each), though Hamish has been walking a bit tentatively since! Thus proving that they are more foolish than Rob and me. While they were running Rob and I spent a pleasant morning at the SNG club house admiring the view of the beautifully calm lake in the sunshine - perfect rowing weather!!

Thanks for all your messages of support, and thanks too to all those people who sponsored us. Your sponsorship money isn't wasted - we've already entered the race again for next year; we're determined to get all the way round!

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Videos and photos will follow [5], and we'll post them on the justgiving page later in the week:
<http://www.justgiving.com/rowingfools>

We have learnt lots of lessons for next year's race. The key one being "don't sink". We'll try harder at that next time. Rob has already stated drawing up plans for an unsinkable rowing catamaran!

On arriving back in Cambridge today I wanted some exercise but didn't fancy rowing - so I went for a swim instead!

Thanks again all,

Joe (& Alan, James, Hamish, Rob)

[1] The club house is shared with the sailing club, and doesn't appear affected by budget restrictions. For example, while the "trophy cabinet" in our boat house is limited to a few medals and pennants pinned to the notice board, the SNG have a cabinet bulging with silverware, including the Americas Cup. The *actual* Americas Cup.

[2] The boats aren't buoyant, and are open at the top so water can easily get in. Standard practice is to make covers for the bow and stern, and to add a platform over the riggers to stop splashes coming over the side. This involves wooden poles, sheets of polythene, and lots of gaffa tape!

[3] Accommodation provided by the club for racers was an underground nuclear bunker. Big enough to accommodate 170 or so people, though I imagine the queues for the three showers and four loos would get quite long were it full!

[4] The pump would have been more at home basting a turkey. Not too large a turkey though, as your dinner guests might get too hungry waiting.

[5] We have our entire (short) race on camera, plus footage of Alan and Hamish's "baywatch" style diving into the lake to pull submerged boats ashore.