



The non-stop course record of the Devizes to Westminster International Canoe Race

2019 marks the 40th anniversary of the DW non-stop course record, set by Brian Greenham and Tim Cornish of Richmond and Reading Canoe Clubs.

The record stands at 15 hours 34 minutes and despite better boat technology and improved training, it has (officially, at least) remained untouched. Steve Baker and Duncan Capps of Richmond Canoe Club and the Army Canoe Union surpassed it in 2000 with a time of 15 hours 18 minutes, but by the time they reached Westminster the race had long been cancelled due to the dangerous conditions, and their 'new' record was disregarded.

Breaking the record requires a combination of factors: a genuinely world-class crew, little wind (or a tail wind at worst), and good flow on the Kennet and Thames. This combination has eluded the race for some time.

Below is a short Q&A with Brian Greenham and Tim Cornish to mark the 40th anniversary of their record-breaking run follows:

Q: What does setting the DW record mean to you now?

Tim: When we set the record in 1979 we already had the record from the previous year and it was being broken regularly so it was not that significant at the time. Winning the race was the thing. As time has passed I guess it has become more meaningful and significant.

Brian: I think the one big advantage I always feel we had was we were not trying to set a record but just trying to win. At the time it was winning that mattered. Setting out to break the record creates a lot of pressure."

Q: Having won DW before and since, were your preparations for the 1979 race any different to the others you have done?

Tim: 1979 was the third year Brian and I had raced together. We were third in 1977 and won for the first time in 1978. Throughout the winter we would do weights, circuit training and running during the week and paddling only at weekends. We always did all four of the Waterside Series* and in 1979 we

did 4.30 for race D, which was a record at that time. I don't recall that we did anything different training-wise in 1979 other than possibly working more on our portaging technique. 10 seconds saved on each portage adds up to about 13 minutes and we worked on making sure that we lost as little amount of time as possible on each portage.

Q: What are you favourite/least favourite memories of DW?

Tim: My least favourite memories are the races that I didn't finish – 1974, 1993 and 2010. My favourite is a second place with Robin Belcher in 1994. We were both 40, neither of us lived in the UK and Robin picked up a bug so we didn't even expect to finish. In the end, we did well. Mark Phillips and Richard Lewis won in 15.42 and we did 15.50, not bad for two old guys.

Brian: My favourite memory would have to be 1979, not because we won but because it was warm. I really didn't enjoy 1975, we had hard ice on the boat and there was snow too...I had tingling fingers for months afterwards. And of course my very first DW in 1973, that was tough.

Q: You both started paddling as youngsters. What advice would you give to the many kids taking part in DW this year for the first time?

Tim: Make sure you do as much preparation as you can in all conditions. Try and pace yourself at a speed you can keep up and make it an enjoyable experience.

Brian: Go out, enjoy yourself and don't worry about your time, my first race took me just under 25 hours!

A BBC Television documentary exists of the 1979 race. It features several crews, including Tim and Brian, and covers the build-up to the race as well as the event itself. The documentary can be found on Youtube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp0OYqj5TEI—or, search for “Devizes to Westminster 1979” to find it.

**The Waterside Series (www.watersideseries.org.uk) are four preparatory races organised by Newbury Canoe Club in the eight weeks before Easter. They run on the Kennet & Avon Canal over increasing distances and are considered an essential part of a canoeist's preparation for DW.*