

Fastnet yacht race: State school Greig City Academy finishes

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Education reporter

11 August 2017 | [Education & Family](#)



GCA SAILING

After five days at sea, a team of inner-city teenagers have made history as the only crew from a comprehensive school known to have finished the world's largest offshore sailing race.

The crew, from Greig City Academy in north London, finished the Fastnet race at Plymouth early on Friday morning.

They were the only school in the 605-mile race this year.

"The lads have been brilliant and disciplined throughout," said teacher Jon Holt.

"It's gone better than expected," he added.

Safe finish

The Greig City crew in their 45ft (13.7m) yacht Scaramouche, were among 2,700 sailors who set off from Southampton last Sunday in the race around the Fastnet lighthouse off Ireland and back to Plymouth.

The winning boat crossed the line on Tuesday to gain one of the most coveted trophies in ocean racing.

The Greig City team said they never expected to win, aiming instead to finish safely.

When they finished at 01:38 on Friday morning, they were several hours ahead of schedule, coming in 142nd overall in a fleet of 368 boats.



On Twitter they described themselves as "proud" and said they had enjoyed every minute.

The sailing club at Greig City, where almost three-quarters of pupils are eligible for free school meals, was only set up four years ago when Mr Holt, a geography teacher and head of the sixth form, organised a dinghy sailing weekend.

Most of the pupils had never sailed before but quickly became hooked.

A massive fundraising effort by pupils and staff enabled the school to buy and restore an old 22ft yacht they found on eBay. Later they bought Scaramouche, a former international racing yacht, for £17,000.

When they entered their first race, which was against teams of adults, they had little hope.

"We thought, 'We have just got to sail around the course and not embarrass ourselves,'" said Mr Holt.

But they won.

Other races followed and the combination of the powerful old yacht and its enthusiastic novice crew continued to make waves.



They qualified for Fastnet earlier this year but realised they had run so short of money that they would probably be unable to enter. Safety is their first priority - so Scaramouche has to

be maintained to the highest standards, entailing hefty bills.

But the pupils were determined to carry on.

"We gave so many different talks," said Montel Jordan, the crew's main helmsman who is 17 and has just done his AS-levels.

"There was a period when we did no sailing but 30 different talks in a month, to different people.

"So, yes, we just tried to get the funding to try and carry on the project as long as possible, because we didn't want to quit before we had done all the things we said we were going to do."



The team's ambitions were saved by a City firm, Pioneer Underwriters, which agreed to sponsor their entire operating budget.

On Friday morning Pioneer said it was "very proud to have supported such a fantastic achievement".

On Twitter, GCA Sailing said: "We may have crossed the finish of this race but this is far from finished.

"Thank you for following, please continue to do so, this is not over."

The Fastnet race has been going for 92 years. The organisers say that they are not aware of any entries from comprehensive schools before now.

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