

## State school pupils make waves in Fastnet race

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JON HOLT GREIG CITY ACADEMY

**Fastnet, the world's largest offshore yacht race, is taking place this week over a 605 mile course - among the entrants is a team from an inner-city state school.**

"Have you ever sailed before or is this your first time? Make sure you are all clipped in. You'll love it."

This was the advice from an experienced yachtsman who spotted a group of 17-year-olds on a boat at Hamble, near Southampton.

In fact, they were members of what the race organisers say is the only school team to qualify for the Rolex Fastnet race this year - and probably the only crew from a comprehensive school in its 92-year history.

This year, 2,700 sailors are taking part in the race - among them, 12 students from Greig City Academy in Hornsey, north London, a school where almost three-quarters of pupils are eligible for free school meals.



The race is notoriously tough.

The fastest crew round the course - from the Solent round the Fastnet lighthouse off Ireland - reached the finish line in Plymouth early on Tuesday morning, to gain one of the most coveted trophies in ocean racing.

For the Greig City pupils, the aim is just to get round safely.

With the race under way, three teams of four students, each led by a professional skipper and a teacher, are taking it in turns to sail the boat on four-hour watches.

"I am thinking about six days just constantly walking up and down, the same food with no flavouring and seeing the same people for the next six days," says Shabazz Patterson, who turns 17 on Friday

"I am a bit rocky about it to be honest - but I'm also looking forward to it. It's good experience."

Montel Jordan, 17, the main helmsman, says simply finishing will be a major accomplishment.

"I think it will be a big challenge," he says.

"We have never done a race that has such a long duration.

"I think everybody thinks about the downsides if something bad happens on the Fastnet race - but you also think of the good sides of it if you do complete it."



Both have just finished their AS-levels and started sailing four years ago, when geography teacher Jon Holt organised a few weekends on dinghies in Poole harbour.

Shabazz says he went along because it was a chance to miss a few days of regular school work and try something different.

But after just one weekend, the pupils were hooked.

The school began to raise money to cover the cost of the trips and to buy and restore first an old 22ft (6.7m) yacht on eBay, and later Scaramouche, a 45ft former international racing yacht for £17,000.

It was expensive. Scaramouche needed new rigging, ropes and sails, and then there was the cost of safety gear - lifejackets, rafts and waterproofs.

As they were starting their GCSEs, the pupils embarked on a campaign of fund-raising talks to convince charitable trusts, yachting suppliers and City of London companies to donate.

Their enthusiasm was infectious, according to Mr Holt, who is now head of the school's sixth-form.

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,'" Mr Holt says.

But they won.



JON HOLT GREIG CITY ACADEMY

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 our first priority," says Mr Holt. So, Scaramouche has to be maintained to the highest standards.

The boat bills were eye-watering, but the pupils were determined to carry on.

"We gave so many different talks," says Montel.

"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."



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City company Pioneer Underwriters, whose bosses are themselves keen sailors, agreed to sponsor Scaramouche, covering the entire operating budget, including transport, food and accommodation.

Mr Holt says that when he organised the first few sailing weekends, as part of an outdoor education project, he never imagined it would lead to Fastnet.

"I didn't think that they would get to a point where they were competing in racing yachts at a national level," he says.

"It's far exceeded my expectations."

## 'Discipline'

He puts their success down to discipline, "partly down to themselves and their families and partly fostered by the school".

"They don't come with a huge amount of prior knowledge, so they do exactly what they are told," he says.

And as sailors who came to the sport relatively late, "they take every single opportunity they can possibly get [and] genuinely want to do this themselves, with no parental push to start them sailing".

Montel says it has been hard to juggle sailing and schoolwork but it has made him more organised, while, in the run up to exams, teachers travelled out to meet the crews on sailing weekends to deliver extra tuition.

He is considering taking a gap year between school and university to qualify as a yacht master, which could help him secure a career as a professional yachtsman.

But first they need to finish the Fastnet race.

"I hope we will be one of the youngest crews ever to finish," says Shabazz.

"And that would just be something that would go down in the history books... that would be something big."

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