

Bart de Zwart Sets a New Record at the Great Glen Paddle Challenge in Scotland

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By Bart de Zwart, international endurance SUP Racer

Green mountains, hairy cows, old castles and the Loch Ness monster ... what a more perfect backdrop for a spectacular SUP race than Scotland!



Unfortunately the former organizer of the Great Glen Paddle, announced that it was simply cancelled 4 weeks before the event. Luckily, fellow ultra long distance racer **Joanne Hamilton-Vale** and her husband **Peter Vale** took over so I kept my flights and took Dagmar (my wife) oaths adventure to Scotland.

And it is now called the **UK SUP Great Glen Paddle Challenge**. The course consists of three lakes (lochs) and canals in between with locks. Straight across Scotland. We started in Inverness on the North Sea side of Scotland going all the way to the West coast of Scotland (Irish Sea).



With only a few days left to organize a SUP race and a cold and windy weather in the forecast, only 10 paddlers showed up to the 3:00 am start.

We started at 3:30 am, in pitch darkness with only the navigation lights on our SUP boards and a faint glow from the disappearing moon behind the black clouds.

I had studied the maps. Apart from the 40km Loch Ness the route was not going to be too hard to find I hoped.



After the start, we quickly disappeared in the night. First a 10 km canal to the beginning of Loch Ness. I was paddling on my **Starboard Sprint 14' x 23"** and didn't know what to expect. The Sprint is a relatively narrow flat water board. If it was going to be windy, it would be a wild and tippy ride. The water temperature on the lakes was cold (5-12 degrees Celsius).

I dressed for racing. Pretty light so I wouldn't overheat. I wasn't dressed for swimming but I had brought a thick survival blanket and extra jacket which was part of the required gear (Life vest, navigation lights, GPS tracker and leash). I opted not to take my **SupSkin drysuit** which would have been the wiser choice. The GPS tracker is a good way for long distance races to keep track of racers and a lot more environmental friendly than having a support boat like they use in the M2O for every racer!

I passed the canal quick and arrived at Loch Ness in almost pitch dark. I turned off my front navigation light so I could see at least a shimmer of the water but it felt almost as if I had my eyes closed, at least I could see a vague contour of the mountains around the Loch so I could find my way to the bottom of the lake where the entrance of the next canal was. The lake was about 40km long, after 30 minutes the waves from behind really picked up and it started to be a downwinder. Being on my narrow board and seeing nothing, it was not an easy task to say the least. And then not to think of the dangers meeting the famous Loch Ness's Monster. Luckily Joanne brought a whisky offering to keep him calm and I didn't see the monster.



I made decent progress. After almost 4 hrs on the lake, very slowly, the day light appeared. Now I was able to see waves and could ride them, still very tippy but a lot easier now. But it all seemed very fitting at the end of the day: a rough race in a rough lake, surrounded by rough mountains in rough cold and windy weather. I had travelled the last couple of days with Dagmar through the highlands and to the Islands of Scotland and I just love the landscapes and nature here. I thought of the other racers in the beginning, I had seen the lights of Joanne and Phil but I thought mostly of **Dean Duncan who is blind and was doing this whole race with Allistair Swinsco who guided him through the route.** Now THAT is a challenge!

After 5 hours and 30 minutes, I got to the locks on the other side of the Loch Ness. I was relieved **I had passed the hardest part of the race and didn't even fall in.** Dagmar was supporting me and gave me some food and a fresh bladder with energy drink. Another 2 set of locks followed before we got to the next lake, **Loch Oich**, a small but beautiful lake with some castle ruins halfway. The weather was better than expected, it was supposed to rain all day, it was dark and cloudy with only a few drops here and there. However it was very windy and cold. But it is all relative, in Scotland this is a good Scottish day, for a Dutch-transplant-Hawaiian, a freaking fresh and cold day.



After Loch Oich, a few more locks until we got to **Loch Lochy** another 20 kilometre lake. I was still feeling fit after 8 hrs of paddling but I started to feel **ultram** pain in my knees and legs especially on the last half of this lake when it became a full on downwinder again. So I was glad when I got to the last locks at the end of the lake. One more portage over the locks and another nice 10km to go. The last couple of hours I realized I could just do it under 11 hours if I would keep pushing which would break the 2 year old record set by **Mark Slater.** **After 10 hours 50 minutes and 12 seconds I passed the finish line, a new record by 27 min.**



Joanne Hamilton-Vale came in after 11 hours and 37 minutes, breaking her own record too.

Phil Plume came in 3rd after 12 hours and 41min. But the best effort came from Dean Dunbar who, paddling blind all the way, came in after 14 hours and 47 minutes. **Allistair Swinsco** guided all night and day. After paddling for 4 hrs in the pitch black myself, today, I can only scratch the service off what Dean always feels when he is paddling. Great athlete and even greater spirit.



Great Thanks to:

Starboard for the support and making fast and innovative and sustainable boards
Black Project fins, Supskin Drysuit, Patagonia and Maui Jim sunglasses

SUP – Great Glen Paddle Challenge

Inverness to Fort William, Scotland.

October 2016

I bought my first stand-up paddle-board in April 2014. In the October I took on my first big trip, paddling 57 miles, (92km), along the **Caledonian Canal** from Fort William to Inverness, with my great mate Carl Sawyer, who introduced me to SUP, and his brother Jason. We did the paddle over 3 days in almost perfect conditions, no rain and the wind right behind us. Little did I know then that I would be back 2 years later, (almost to the day), and I'd be doing it in the opposite direction, non-stop.

The “**UK SUP** Great Glen Paddle Challenge” took place on the 15th of October 2016, and was put together after the organisers of the Great Glen Paddle pulled the plug a month before it was due to take place, due to lack of numbers.

There was a small group of stand-up paddle-boarders, including me, who had entered the race and were very sad to hear it had been cancelled. After some chat on social media, it was decided that the paddle would still go ahead, and Joanne Hamilton Vale, (one of the UK's top race and ultra-long distance paddlers), and her husband Pete Vale, (both from **UK SUP**), picked up the reigns. Tom Wakeford, a local SUPer, set up a dedicated Facebook page, and others also got involved to make it a real team effort.



Start line – inverness

There would be 8 of us participating in the GGPC – 7 SUPers and 1 kayaker, Glen. As Glen was paddling a surf ski and would be faster than most of us, the SUPers would start at 03.30, and Glen would start 2 hours later.

I would be paddling with Allistair Swinsco as my guide again. As with the **Bute** paddle, Ian was unable to join us, so the “3 Amigos” were down to just the 2.

There was a briefing the night before the paddle, where Pete covered the route, safety, (making sure everyone had a tracker), etc. After this, everyone headed off to get some sleep. Rhona and I followed Allistair and Alison up to Inverness to get some sleep in our vans next to the start line.



Joanne Hamilton Vale looking fresh at the end of Loch Ness

After prepping my kit, I was asleep by 10pm and awake again at 11.15. We hadn't realised that the start line was next to a busy taxi rank, which on a Friday night seemed to be doing great business, going by the noise of the cars coming and going, door slamming, and drunken revellers arriving to get a lift.

That hour and a quarter of sleep was all I was going to get, and would play havoc with my already broken eyes.

At 03:28 the 7 SUPers lined up on the start line. Pete counted down, 2 minutes to go. Then, 1 minute, 30 seconds, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5. It was then that I remembered I hadn't turned on my Spot tracker. 3, 2, 1, everyone shot off across the start line into the darkness. Well, everyone except Allistair and I. We pulled into the side and spent the next 3 minutes digging out my tracker and starting it. Not quite the start we had hoped for. Sorry Allistair.

Dean & Allistair on Loch Ness

For the next hour and a half we paddled along the canal towards Loch Ness. We had to go under a very low bridge, which forced us to lie flat on our boards, (which I remember), and just before hitting the loch we had our first portage, (which I don't remember).

As we entered Ness, the water started to get very lumpy. In the pitch black, the only thing we could see was the bright lights of Dores off in the distance to our left. Everyone had some sort of lighting on their boards, and for the next 4 hours I tried to follow Allistair's red tail lights.

After an hour of paddling in these very lumpy and windy conditions, we decided it would be safer to kneel down and paddle. We did this for the next 2 and half hours, until daylight broke and we pulled in to Foyers to stretch our legs and take on some fuel. It was probably just as well that we had that break, as I had already had my first hallucinations, (seeing lights flashing where there

weren't any), and I had been trying to battle my way through this weird dizzy spell. (It took me 20 minutes to work out that this was just tiredness.)



Allistair & Dean finishing Loch Ness

3 miles from the end of Ness I took a swim. I'm not really sure what happened, but I suddenly found myself running on the spot as my board passed under me, until there was no board. Splash!

At around 11 o'clock we arrived at Fort Augustus where we were met by the wonderful duo that is "Debs & Deano", who forced bacon and egg rolls down our throats! (It's terrible what you have to put up with!)

For the next couple of hours we paddled down the canal, across Loch Oich and on to Loch Lochy, where Commander Stumpy greeted with a sloppy face licking- What a welcome! (Oh yeah, Rhona, Alison, Leia, Debs and Deano were there too.)



Commander Stumpy greets Dean & Allistair after Loch Oich

We were now entering the last loch, Loch Lochy. The first 4 miles were fine. By 5 miles it was getting lumpy and by 6 it was wild! I spent the last 4 miles sitting down and paddling, as I was still quite cold from my swim in Ness 3 hours earlier, and didn't fancy a second.



Out on Loch Lochy

As we reached the end of Lochy the light was getting dim, and I was struggling to see anything. We had our 5th and final portage of the day.

From here it was about 7 miles along the canal to the end. A few miles into this Allistair told me to line up with the middle of the arch in the bridge ahead of me. I asked him which arch, as I could see 2. Allistair assured me there was only one. Then 200m further on I saw the next bridge and asked Allistair how many arches there were in this one. He told me there was no bridge. Oh dear, I was getting tired again.

This last section seemed to go on and on, with no end in sight, (but a couple more hallucinations, seeing trees reaching out to me from the banking). Each time we rounded another bend, all Allistair could see ahead was yet one more. Also, the patchy rain that had been on and off all day suddenly came on very heavy.

Eventually we spotted Rhona ahead of us, and she told us we only had 100m to go. OK, it was actually 250m, but at the end of that we crossed the finish line.



The last few metres

We had aimed to complete the paddle in less than 16 hours. When I paddled this route back in 2014, we had covered the 57 miles in 15 ½ hours over 3 days. Today we covered it all in one, with a finish time of 14 hours and 47 minutes. Taking all of our breaks out, our moving time was 13 hours and 59 minutes.

I'd like to point out that in the picture of Allistair and I on land after the paddle, that neither of us are pregnant. We both have our **Palm** Glide PFDs under our cags, and I had my gloves, hat, and spare pork pies in the Arcadia front pouch. That's our story anyway!

Research seems to show that less than 20 SUPers have ever paddled this course – the UK's longest non-stop course. I am the first registered blind person to do it, and Allistair, Tom, and I are the first to do it on inflatable boards, (all **Red Paddle** boards).

Jo also knocked almost 2 hours off her previous time, which had been the female record for this course. Bart De Zwart, one of the worlds' top ultra-long distance paddlers, also set a new course record, knocking 27 minutes off the previous SUP record.

What an amazing group of people, (paddlers on the water and support crews off the water). Thank you to you all! Events are made by the people involved, and that is why this event was AWESOME!

This has been my longest and toughest SUP so far. There were times during the pitch black early morning, with the wind howling, the rain pouring, and whilst battling tiredness and hallucinations when I thought about giving up, but I couldn't. As well as being a challenge in its' own right, I was also using this challenge to see if I was anywhere near fit enough for my next BIG challenge next year – **SUP 11 City Tour** non-stop, 220km in under 35 hours. If I couldn't manage the GGPC, there is no way I could even think about taking on the 11 City. I'm certainly not fit enough for that paddle now, but I am happy where I am, and with plenty of training, I hope to be fit enough when the time comes. Not only will I be doing the **11 City**, but Jo will be my guide! She has completed it 4 times – twice each for the 5 day event and the non-stop. No slacking for me then!