

2019 Season Summary

Following on from a storming 2018 season which saw British Soldier (BS) win the overall Royal Ocean Racing Club (RORC) championship, the 2019 season focused on consolidating the team and X-41 yacht with the biannual Fastnet race at the forefront of our efforts. BS competed in five RORC races as well as the IRC nationals and Cowes week, retiring the X-41 after three amazing seasons due to the purchase of a Sun Fast 3600 previously known as Redshift Reloaded.

The return from the 2018 Rolex Middle Sea race had left BS with some much-needed maintenance and despite the efforts of many crew who gave up their weekends to prepare the boat, the Myth of Malham was the first race that BS entered in the 2019 season. It was champagne sailing for much of the race but with a tricky light winds period overnight the team elected to stay closer to shore for the sea breeze. Unfortunately, the wind picked up the offshore half of the fleet first who gained sea miles, and the rankings didn't change during the reach back from the Eddystone lighthouse. BS finished mid-pack overall in a race that could have gone either way.

The Morgan Cup again proved to be a challenge with a relatively light airs battle from Cowes to Dieppe. Almost completely stopped off the Needles due to the lack of breeze, the fleet was treated to an airshow from a Spitfire before the race effectively restarted with the faintest breaths of westerly winds. Staying high on the racetrack, BS aimed to charge down with the asymmetric spinnaker later in the race but it sadly was not to be. A fiercely contested battle at the finish involved 9 boats from Classes 1, 2 and 3 short-gybing at pace into a very shallow finish line off the Dieppe beaches – the crew worked hard after a long race until the very end for another mid-pack finish. As is so often the case, the wind picked up after the race for a fast broad reach back to Gosport which was achieved in under half the time that it took for the race itself!

Inshore racing proved to be as challenging this year as offshore, with results in the IRC Nationals and Cowes week below expectations. What was heartening for the Committee to see was that a significant number of new crew and skippers participated on BS in fast-paced round-the-cans action in the Solent. The strong push from the Committee to give new talent an opportunity to get on the boat has resulted in over 70 Army personnel having the opportunity to race at the highest level of European Offshore Sailing. The Committee want to reaffirm the ethos that this is YOUR BOAT and that prospective offshore racers are encouraged to get in touch.

The long slog to St Malo was initially blessed again by champagne sailing conditions, fast out of the Solent across to the Channel Islands with virtually every combination of sail plan being used in quickly shifting wind directions. The crew took this in their stride with a large proportion later making up the Fastnet team, it proved to be a valuable training weekend. Light downwind airs after the Channel Islands didn't suit BS's asymmetric setup and it was heart-breaking to watch the symmetrical rigs edge past running in towards St Malo. Dipping the line in a sadly familiar mid-pack finish position, BS motor-sailed back to Gosport via St Peters Port in Guernsey for commiseration ice creams.

The hard work of crew members giving up their weekends to resolve maintenance tasks on BS began to pay off towards the latter end of the season, and the Committee's thanks go to all of those who made the effort to keep BS racing. It doesn't go unnoticed and is a factor in team selection! BS finished a strong fifth in the Channel Race, often famed for being one of the more testing events on the calendar. Despite being the shortest race of the season at under 24 hours between the starting gun and crossing the finish line, it was extremely competitive and the time between third and seventh place was less than 30 minutes.

Skipper Phil Caswell remarked that Fastnet 2019 was probably one of the toughest races that he had competed in, with all crew pushing the boat and themselves to the limit of endurance. With over 390 yachts packing the start line, it was tight and aggressive getting out of the Solent and extremely fast down to the tip of Cornwall. Watching super-maxi 100ft yachts like Hong Kong based Scallywag as well as two Volvo Ocean 70's hurtle past added to the enormity of the race. Conditions were fair until the Irish sea when the wind and waves picked up, leading to a challenging 28-hour stint on the rail with limited relief for the crew. Despite the disparity in size, BS held off the Joint Services Challenge 72 Discoverer until just short of Fastnet rock, one of 10 Service yachts competing for the Culdrose Trophy. The return across the Irish sea was extraordinarily fast, with it being likely that BS set its own 24 hour distance record averaging 10 knots for much of the leg to Plymouth. With a victory on corrected time in the Service yachts category and a top third place in IRC 2, the team had demonstrated that the X-41 was still a force to be reckoned with on her last major race of the season.

BS finished the season 9th in RORC IRC class 2 which, given that only five contributing races were completed, is a great result and a tribute to the X-41 which has served the team for three successful seasons. 2020 promises to be an exciting new chapter for Army Offshore Racing with a new boat, a squad of exciting talent and a year which will include the Round Ireland race. The new boat will be called Fujitsu British Soldier (FBS) after the generous assistance from our title sponsor Fujitsu in acquiring the Sun Fast 3600; as Army soldiers it is YOUR BOAT and we encourage applications from Regular and Reserve soldiers of all ranks to get involved. See you in 2020.