Race Day – John Stephens

Well, this wasn't how I'd imagined my first cruiser race would go. We got to the harbour with plenty of time to spare and chatted with the other racers about tactics and how the changing weather might affect our day. Everyone was very relaxed, and nobody seemed in too much of a hurry. I just went with the flow. The first 'water taxi' went out full and we waited for it to return. We dropped Diarmid off first and after messing about with some seaweed, finally got to Windchat. By the time we got on board and removed the sail covers and started the engine, Mike the race officer was counting down to the 5mins to go. Turn the engine off and prepare to sail off the mooring. Another first. Unfortunately, my crew couldn't free the wire holding the strop to the bow roller and I couldn't raise the mainsail, due to the excessive amount of friction from the two reefing lines. Let the swearing commence. Now with the mainsail halyard on the small winch by the hatch and grabbing handfuls reefing lines from the outboard boom end, the mainsail was a little more than halfway up the mast. Happily, the furling headsail is a lot more cooperative and we're finally heading to the start line, just in time to see the main fleet sail off into the distance. We'll never catch them if I don't get this mainsail fully hoisted. I decide to use the larger port-side, self-tailing headsail sheet winch, as the smaller one doesn't have enough grip and keeps slipping. This works a treat and now the head of the mainsail is touching the top of the mast and we're gaining on the small yellow sailboat. However, approaching the PHM Skate Bank Inner I realise I have an over-ride on the winch and the mainsail halyard is now bar tight. The sail is fully hoisted, so there is nowhere to get any slack. My first thought is if the wind picks up suddenly, I'll have to cut the line and lower the sail. To make matters worse we aren't going to make it around the mark. More swearing. My crew veers away and as I'm now taking the winch apart, another first. As I can't take in the headsail sheet on the other side, we effectively execute a textbook 'heave to'. I quickly shove all the screws and winch parts into my pocket, and we complete a gybe and a tack around the can and head down towards the orange buoy. With the mainsail halyard free I can now try to reassemble the winch, which for some reason doesn't want to go back together. The screws seem too long. My only option is to take the starboard side winch apart and see how it all fits together. Thank God we're not heeling over too much and so far, nothing important has gone over the side. I'd missed fitting one of the plastic discs and once in place the three long screws screw down perfectly. Now the two semi-circular keys won't seat correctly, meaning the four screw holes on top aren't aligned. Moderate swearing. As I'm just about ready to throw the whole thing overboard my crew takes over and finds that lifting the winch body allows the two pieces to slot neatly into place. Genius. Now with both winches back together and both sails flying nicely we make our way to the PHM - Skate Bank Outer. A very last-minute double tack, we're passing the can and we're …. drifting, sideways. I'd only just said that we'll see the rest of the fleet heading our way once we get to the lighthouse. However, they are stuck in their own world of pain on the other side of the channel, desperately trying to round PHM Craigmee. With almost no wind the currents are winning this one. After an hour drifting around in circles we call it a day. This definitely wasn't how I'd imagined my first race day. I know now why it's called the Black Isle Challenge Cup.

John Stevens