

ROWING'S KOOZY COUSINS

by John TRACEY



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One look at anyone else's family tree reveals similarities. We all have a crazy uncle Fred. What about your wacky cousin Shannon? And no one knows what's up with your nephew Chris.

Despite all your family's idiosyncrasies there is something about them that draws you closer and makes you want to spend more time with them. And once you do you find that you have more in common with them than you first thought.

Well, rowing has a family tree too. While we may think that our two cousins profiled here are "kooky," you'll find that we are all driven by the same passion and compulsion that draws us to the water every day.

Racing the North Atlantic

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It had to be nearly a thousand miles off shore when one of my dreams finally came true. I have spent all of my life close to some sort of ambient light. When camping, there are cities and towns miles away and, even on the water, there always seemed to be a ship on the horizon. Last night we had no moon, no ships, and only trace clouds on the horizon. We took a brief rest, shut down the neon of our instruments and I got to bask, for the first time, without any other light, among the stars. If I looked straight up to the night sky I almost felt like I was in space itself, floating.

— Jordan Hanssen

WHEN WE, THE TRADITIONAL rowing enthusiasts, think of ocean rowing, we typically might think of a modified version of our own equipment. It's probably something that looks and feels similar to our shells, only slightly bigger or wider, with a shallower, self-bailing cockpit. We think of rowing around near a beach, playing in the waves a little. If

we are bold enough to race, we might think of racing around an island. Really big races are held over distances of 100 miles. That's a huge distance for those of us accustomed to 2,000 meters or a three-mile head race.

Chances are, we would not think about rowing, let alone racing, across the North Atlantic Ocean—say, from New York Harbor to Falmouth, England. But amazingly enough, that's exactly what this story is about. Four guys from the crew program at the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington have entered the Shepherd Ocean Fours Rowing Race, organized by Woodvale Events, Ltd., a U.K.-based organization that designed their boat and specializes in ocean rowing races.

As I write, Jordan Hanssen, Dylan LeValley, Greg Spooner, and Brad Vickers, are not only in the middle of the North Atlantic, racing to England, they're 174 miles in the lead. Imagine telling that to your coach. Talk about a horizon job—that's more like a curvature-of-the-earth job. The potential for smack talk is commensurate with the scale of

the 3,100-nautical-mile journey from New York to Falmouth, England: "When we say we're going to beat you by an entire time zone, we're not kidding." CNN has covered them, as have most of the media organizations in Seattle. ABC's *Good Morning America*, which bade them farewell out of New York Harbor, will meet them at the U.K. finish line in Falmouth, along with a substantial, media-saturated welcoming party. Over the past year and a half, they've done nothing with their lives but plan every detail of this race. "Rowing across the Atlantic is the easy part," Spooner told me. "It's the preparation that wins the race." Or increases your chances of survival, as the case may be.

Upon meeting the crew, one loses the sense that this idea is crazy. Above all, it's clear that they've done their homework and have made all necessary preparations. They're confident almost to the point of being cocky, yet they're completely humble about the power of the elements and the enormity of the task. They're totally goofy and deadly serious at the same time. While I was with them, they had endless distractions but remained entirely focused. And the best part of all (for *Rowing News* readers) is that while the other teams have brave members who are all wonderful people, none is a rower in the sense we can relate to. These guys are. They all rowed together in college—Hanssen, Vickers, and LeValley on the same team, and Spooner a few years ahead (he also coached the other three after he graduated). They know what it means to take it up and go for the finish line. These guys are our guys.

The magnitude of this undertaking defies comprehension. Until this race, only nine rowing crossings of the North Atlantic had been successful, but no one has ever rowed from the U.S. mainland to the U.K. mainland without stopping somewhere along the way.

It started with a poster. While at a local rowing club in Tacoma, Washington, in November 2004, Hanssen saw a poster for the race, complete with a picture of the



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unpleasant game of sardines, for all four of the guys, strapped down to prevent crashing around, in the event they have to ride out a storm. They've already successfully tested this scenario during Tropical Storm Alberto, which struck them dead-on a few weeks after the race started.

The 29-foot standardized boats were designed and provided by Woodvale. The boat uses water as ballast to keep it from capsizing, or to right itself if it does flip over. This summer's race is the first to use four-person boats, and it's the first to cross the North Atlantic (other races have started in the Canary Islands, off the coast of Africa, and ended in the Caribbean). The current race involves four entrants and one safety boat, a 40-foot cruising sailboat that accompanies the teams should an emergency arise. However, considering that the safety boat could be as many as six days away, the teams are strongly encouraged to be as self-sufficient as possible in an emergency. Other than emergency aid from the safety boat, no outside assistance is allowed.

The three other crews are all from the U.K., and at least two of the others are raising money for charity (as is the U.S. team). One team, which I met in the Liberty Marina parking lot a week before the start, consisted of rugby-playing policemen from London. Unfortunately, "Team Sevenoaks" (named for their rugby club) had to bail out of the

race shortly after the start. While off the coast of Long Island, their hatch covers leaked and they took on water, causing the boat to list. Their daggerboard also broke, presumably from the pressure caused by the leaking water and listing hull (a grim reminder of the importance of well thought-out preparations and ingenuity). The other two teams, Yorkshire Warrior, and Team Hesco, have affiliations with the British military and are still racing.

Our guys are raising money for the American Lung Association, a cause near and dear to Hanssen's heart. When he was three years old, his father was carrying him to bed and suffered a fatal asthma attack. Their boat, the James Robert Hanssen, is named for Hanssen's dad. He feels very close to the father he never really knew—although he remembers the details of his father's death. He will honor his father's memory and spirit not only by completing, and hopefully winning, this race, but also by climbing Knocknarea Mountain on the west coast of Ireland. On this mountaintop, the ashes of James Robert Hanssen were spread, and here Jordan feels closest to his dad. Now 23, Hanssen hasn't climbed the mountain since he was 11. "It's the most beautiful view I've ever seen," he recalled.

In the two days I spent with Team Hanssen, they never seemed in the least bit stressed, with only seven days to go before the start.

They were constantly tinkering with their boat—inventing this, attaching that. We went over their basic course with an experienced seaman, Captain Jim Chambers, Port Captain of the Liberty Yacht Club (LYC) in Jersey City, NJ, located at the mouth of the Hudson River across from lower Manhattan. LYC hosted the start of the race and provided facilities and support for all four teams. As Captain Chambers, who has crossed the North Atlantic by sailboat several times, showed them the course, the scale of this endeavor became frighteningly clear. "The Labrador current will keep you from going too high, and the Gulf Stream will take you all the way to Europe," Chambers explained to the teams. "Once you clear Nantucket Island," he continued, "your next stop is the U.K." I don't know how the others felt, but that was my reality check.

The four American rowers reminded me of the crew of an Apollo moon trip or a space shuttle mission—cramped into tight quarters with lots of high-tech equipment at their disposal, but ultimately needing to rely on their own instincts and ingenuity to get the job done. As I watched them jury-rigging this and that, literally creating innovations right before my eyes (all the while laughing, joking, and making me feel welcome), I had no doubt that they'd succeed.

Check out their Web site to can see how they did. (www.oarnorthwest.com)



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Dragon Boat Racing

WHEN MY EDITOR ASKED me to go to New York to check out the race across the Atlantic, I thought, “No problem. I haven’t been there for a while, and it ought to be pretty interesting; after all, it’s not like people race across the Atlantic every day.” But another, perhaps subconscious, reason for my unquestioning attitude was the knowledge that I would not have to be one of the rowers. These four guys signed up for it, not me. I may get to paddle their boat on the Hudson (turned out I couldn’t because the boat wasn’t ready), but I wouldn’t be part of the race. Phew.

For my next task, however, the assignment was a little different. Call up a local dragon boat club and go out for a practice. At first, it seemed like a piece of cake. I quickly discovered the existence of the Dragon Boat Club of Boston (DBCBC), an established club that practices on the Charles River. They launch from the Esplanade next to the Hatch Shell, where the Boston Pops hold their Fourth Of July extravaganza.

The members of the DBCBC could not have been more welcoming. Many who hear the word “journalist,” immediately conjure up a nasty “60 Minutes” scenario and run for the hills. The dragon boaters however actually wanted the publicity. Soon after I arrived, however, I realized I’d be going out on a full-fledged practice. They weren’t going to alter their schedule one iota for me. Well, there was one change—one of their members, Anh Dao Kolbe, generously offered to take pictures of me from the other boat (they have two). She also gave me an inkling of what was to come. “Be prepared to get completely soaked,” she warned.

My initial briefing was conducted by Jonathan Scherer, the club’s president and coach, and Quintana (“Quin”) Heathman, who had several years experience and would be the “Drummer” on my boat. The drummer is very similar to a coxswain in crew, except that he or she doesn’t steer. The drummer is in the bow and faces aft, towards the crew—the boat is steered from the stern. He

explained the basics of dragon boat racing, and Scherer put me in a boat and went over the intricate technique of paddling. To the uninitiated it looks like you’re just paddling a big canoe, there’s a specific, and not altogether easy, technique—just like in rowing.

Although the body mechanics are much different from rowing, the terminology and concepts are amazingly similar. Timing is everything—getting the blades in and out at the same time is probably the most important element. (Yup, I could relate to that.) Many of the commands are the same: “way enough,” “the catch,” and “the finish,” for example. Even the way that Quin issued her commands and motivated us as drummer were remarkably similar to rowing in an eight or a four. We did power pieces, timed pieces, and race pieces against the other boat.

We did starts. We did “steady state” (they didn’t call it that) and light paddles.

I’ve rowed for many years, and at the very least am competent. But in this situation, I was brought right back to the novice level. The technique is extremely complex. You twist your upper body significantly so that you can use your “core” for most of your power (sound familiar?). You hold your top hand on the end of the paddle, high up, and it moves in an up-and-down motion. Your bottom hand, which pulls the blade through the water, is near the blade. You form an “A” with your arms and body (I never quite clued into this part, but apparently it’s pretty important).

You’re sitting on fixed seats, two to a seat, so obviously you’re not using your legs. The stroke is short and extremely quick, which



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makes the timing difficult. Not only that, but when you have up to 20 people (ten on each side) all doing the same thing, and you're going at what seemed to me like 60-80 strokes per minute (no slide, just arms and back, or "twist"), you can't take a break if you get tired.

I found this out the hard way several times. When I'm rowing in my single, at a lovely 22-24 strokes per minute, I can ease off and take a drink of water or catch my breath. I accidentally let up a few times in this boat, and it was not unlike putting a stick in a bicycle wheel. I got right back into it as fast as I could, and no one said anything (as mentioned, they were exceedingly polite). But I still felt like an idiot and realized that this wasn't going to be easy.

I could tell right away that Heathman would not be "dumbing down" the practice just because I was in the boat. When we did a three-minute piece, it was fast and furious.

And yes, I did get soaked (love that dirty water). We raced twice against the other boat for about three-to-four minutes each time. We were deemed the stronger boat, so we gave them a head start, even though we had an extra non-paddling person in the boat (one guy sustained a minor injury during one of our pieces).

We lost by a little, and my competitive juices were flowing. There was some minor smack talk back and forth, and I joined right in. "Next time we'll go at more than half-pressure!" I yelled over to the other boat. I got some surprised looks and some polite, fake laughs. Okie dokie, so maybe the smack talk isn't quite the same as in rowing, I realized. Better keep my mouth shut from here on out. In the next race, however, we won, and I began to think about taking up a new sport.

One of the coolest things about dragon boat racing is that, like many Chinese cultural traditions, it is steeped in history and legend.

Our sport is certainly steeped in tradition, as a walk through any old boathouse, surrounded with pictures and trophies, makes clear. But with dragon boat racing, it's not just a race, it's a cultural experience.

The sport traces its roots to Qu Yuan (340-278 B.C.), a poet, scholar, and respected diplomat. He was also a top advisor to the King of the state of Chu, one of the seven states in China that were all vying for power and influence over the others. He lived during the Warring States period in Chinese history, which, as the name suggests, was not exactly an easy time.

China at that time was not a united country—similar to Europe during medieval times. Qu Yuan tried to form an alliance with another state called Qi. But then, just as today, one can't go out on a political limb without making enemies, and he was banished to a region north of the river Han. He fell back into favor when the King's son held

the Chu throne, but this was short-lived, and he was again banished. He turned to writing, and his poetry and essays, combined with his vast knowledge of the country's history, politics, and culture, brought him tremendous fame and respect from his fellow countrymen. Though his denunciation of corruption earned him few friends among those in power, the people loved him (and still do).

Qu Yuan's beloved state of Chu was eventually overtaken by another, and in 278 B.C., the capital city of Chu was taken. Distraught by this emotional loss of his country, legend has it that Qu Yuan drowned himself by holding onto a large rock and hurling himself into the Miluo River.

The legend tells us that the River Dragon, a magical creature, flew to a quiet place to be with Qu Yuan and shared in his grief (unlike in Europe or J.R.R. Tolkien novels, dragons in China are good). Hearing of his drowning,

the villagers rushed to their boats and raced down the river to save Qu Yuan. The fishermen banged on drums and slapped their oars into the water to scare the fish away.

Dragon boat racing began more than 2,000 years ago in Southern China, as a fertility rite to ensure a bountiful harvest, but also to honor the legend of Qu Yuan. According to the DBCB's Web site, "The race was held to avert misfortune and encourage the rains for prosperity"—and the object of their worship was the dragon. The dragon is a symbol of water in Asia, and "it is said to rule the rivers and seas and dominate the clouds and rains."

As a result, dragon boat races are filled with myriad festivities, including stage performances, martial arts demonstrations, music, and lots of food. The dragon boats are decorated artistically with bright colors and intricate markings.

The great thing about dragon boat racing is that anyone can do it; like rowing, there is much support and participants are encouraged at all levels. Rowers are especially welcomed, because we tend to "get" the timing, which intuitively makes sense. I only hope I didn't embarrass my sport with my lousy technique.

By the end of the practice, however, Heathman finally got me to make some real improvements. "Look at the guy ahead of you in the red shirt. See how he's twisting his body? Yeah! That's how you do it!" Too bad practice was almost over. Maybe next time. □



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