

2005 Ocean Rowing Regatta,

Team Atlantic 4,  
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Two years of planning, relentless searches for sponsors, 4 hours of training a day, every weekend away in the boat getting used to life on board, injuries and crew changes, but we were here, on the start line for the 2005 Atlantic Ocean Rowing Race. The race had been delayed by 3 days due to tropical storm Delta which passed over the Canaries 12 hours after the proposed start time.

Standing on the sea wall looking out as tropical storm waves and gales pounded the small island; it really hit home what we were about to do and where we were about to go. The season for tropical storms should have finished about 5 weeks prior; so this must be the last for this season?

Walking from our hotel room to the jetty where our 23 foot long, specially made boat was sitting low in the water with all the food and equipment needed, for 4 men to live unsupported for upto 10 weeks I couldn't help but feel completely insignificant compared to the giant undertaking in front of us.

The morning of the start was a little surreal, trying to accept the fact that I will step off the jetty in La Gomera and not touch land until Antigua. I just couldn't get my head round the scale of this journey. I set myself small targets: As navigator my first target was to get far enough away from land to be safe from storms that may blow us back onto the land. As long as the boat was in open water, I was confident that it wouldn't sink whatever the conditions, but hitting land was another matter.

Milling around in the harbour waiting for the clackson to sound, the banter was being thrown around between the crews. Everybody in high spirits, but for me, it was a front. Beneath the jokes and smiles my anxiety grew. What lay ahead? Could my body tolerate the punishing routine? Would I cope with the 1 hour on, 1 hour off shift system? Could I actually navigate across 3000 miles of ocean and find Antigua?!

At last we are off. The pairs and fours set off at faster pace, with the solos boats brining in the rear. Within two hours we were out of sight of any other boats, this was it, Atlantic4 was on its own.

None of us had been this far out in the ocean before. None of us had a background in sea travel. Our collective knowledge had been gathered in the last two years of training. We had spent enough time training on board to learn how to get into a rhythm: Row 55 minutes, wake up your cabin partner and count down the last 5 minutes until you can get into the cabin, eat, treat salt sores and get a much needed 45 minutes sleep. Then the cycle starts again.

We knew from our training that it was crucial to settle into our routine as quickly as possible to make life on board work. We all had different ways of reaching our mutual

goal. I had set a 4-day barrier and knew getting into the rhythm of life on board would be hard but if I could make 4 days with out any problems I knew I could keep going.

At first the weather was kind to us. For the first four days we had a large swell and wind pushing us Southwest towards our Caribbean destination. We were all pleased with our progress and not surprised to hear Atlantic4 was leading the race.

We stopped rowing briefly on day five to have a swim and sort out some storage problems. Space on board was limited, as we consumed our 8000-calorie daily ration packs we had to adjust the storage areas to keep the boat trimmed in the water.

The challenge was going to plan. We were averaging around 75 miles in a 24-hour period and the oars were feeling quite light. As the first week passed, the swell from the North started to build. Rolling 60ft waves would lift the boat, allowed us to see for miles, and then seconds later we were in a valley surrounded by watery peaks. Experienced sailors would have alarm bells ringing at this point, but to our un-initiated crew the going was still good.

The long rolling swell was in fact the first signs of hurricane Epsylon brewing further east of our position. As the weather reports came in via text on our satellite phone we could not believe our eyes. Epsylon was heading straight towards our position. There had been no documented hurricanes at this time of year in this part of the world. Surely it must be a small depression, which would dissipate over time?

As Hurricane Epsylon continued to head east, we tried to get as far out of the way as possible. The storm was travelling at nearly 6 knots, and with our average speed at 3 knots we had to second guess Epsylons route. We decided to head south, pulling as hard as we could for 36 hours. In the end progress was hopeless - the wind was pushing us faster and faster west towards Africa. Finally, we were forced to stop and the sea anchor was deployed.

The sea anchor looks like a parachute: it sits around 50m behind the boat and sinks into ocean sitting 5-10m below the surface. As the boat was blown towards Africa the parachute slowed the backwards progress. Deploying the sea anchor did allow us to have a break from rowing, but the small cabins meant that we could not all shelter - inside at the same time - someone always had to be on deck.

As the storms pounded our small boat the noise in the cabins was horrendous. The waves slammed into the 6mm plywood cabins, sounding like a crack of thunder. The boat was violently tossed from side to side, many times getting close to a full capsizes. Lying in the cabin, I prayed "I know this boat can self right itself but please God don't test it now". The storm pounded the boat for 30 hours.

The weather following Hurricane Epsylon was not conducive to rowing west and eventually after 4 days we managed to row against the weather and make 12 nautical miles in 24 hours. The wind picked up again and we had to get back onto the sea anchor. Turning on the GPS in the morning we were disappointed to see that we had lost 24 miles - the previous 24 hours had been a complete waste of time. This process of gaining the losing mileage continued for 2 more days. Eventually we managed to

get going in a southerly direction; once again we were making progress, not west but south.

During the hurricane, moral had been tested but and we had pulled through and our confidence in the boat increased. Heading south for the next week we struggled to regain our rhythm but persevered. Rowing was tough, each stroke felt like we were pulling through syrup and temperatures regularly topped 40 degrees Celsius. As days passed, our attention turned to Christmas in only a week's time.

The days and weeks in the middle of the crossing blurred into one. Rowing 1 hour on, and 1 hour off our bodies slowly started to wear, our minds wandered with sleep deprivation and we all suffered from hallucinations. The days were highlighted by visits from passing whales and dolphins, sighting wildlife always brought smiles to the crew, with any break from routine bringing home our unique situation.

On Christmas Day was stopped for one hour, cooked up some noodles and exchanged presents. Unfortunately 50% of the crew had forgotten to buy presents but the day was saved by a sneaky package from my mum and sister containing small presents for everyone. With presents passed round and any edible treats quickly eaten we tucked into Christmas noodles. Relaxing and enjoying the rare rest and break from routine it was a shock to see a super tanker on the horizon heading straight for our position.

We had been at sea for 25 days and having not seen another boat we were surprised to say the least. I got on the radio and contacted the ship, they quickly replied and changed direction slightly. I had a short conversation with the captain who seemed to be concerned for our safety in the ocean in such a small boat. However, he clearly wasn't too concerned as he proceeded to pass within 50 meters of our small boat sending a bow wave thundering towards us!

The hour's break was soon over and we were straight back to the oars and back into our routine.

The hours, days and weeks began to blur, New Year passed with only a five-minute break to shake hands and take a photo. Stopping in the middle of the night was always scary: if the moon was not out and the clouds blocked out the starlight we had no idea which direction the waves would hit the boat from. Anticipating waves and allowing the boat to surf makes the going significantly faster and more enjoyable.

We eventually began to head west and progress was improved. We had seven days of good currents and winds pushing us straight towards Antigua. Then our luck ran out. Incredibly another tropical storm was circulating just north of our position. Again we head south, treading a fine line of heading below 16 degrees north, but avoiding going too far south which would mean we would have to fight against north easterly currents towards Antigua.

The going was painfully slow but we managed to make approximately 25 miles each day for 6 days. This was pleasing as we heard many other crews had to stop, deploy the sea anchor and wait out the bad weather. Eventually the weather improved and we start to make real progress towards Antigua.

With around 300 miles to go we heard on the radio that James Cracknell and Ben Fogel (EDF Energy) were closing in on us rapidly. We pulled hard and settled in for a prolonged sprint finish!

At times we were only a matter of 1 mile apart and on day 46 we received news that they had overtaken us, and still moving fast. We talked with Ben and James regularly on the VHF radio and assisted their navigation towards Antigua they had lost use of their GPS and were having problems navigating. The realisation of losing second place made us pull harder and harder, our hard work was rewarded at around 7pm on 18<sup>th</sup> January, after 49 days at sea, we caught our first glimpse of land.

Our thoughts immediately focused on to friends, family and loved ones waiting for us on Antigua - we have nearly made it.

I couldn't allow myself to believe we had made it safely until I got off the boat and stepped onto terra firma. Moving closer to land made navigation more difficult. We were to head directly for a lighthouse situated on Cape Shirley Heights at the southern most tip of Antigua. However, in true Caribbean style the bulb had blown and not been replaced!

As the ocean and winds pushed us towards Antigua, we eventually heard the first engine in 7 weeks. The local search and rescue boat had come out to escort us in. The feeling of elation was fantastic, and words could not describe the relief. At 3 miles out from the island with the security of a rescue boat following our progress I started to allow myself to feel as if we might just pull off this extraordinary race.

As we approached land, more boats came out to meet us on one of the darkest nights of the whole crossing. We officially crossed the finish line in 49 days, 16 hours and 22 minutes. We were the second team to finish the race, in celebration we set off our remaining flares and headed into English Harbour. Stepping of the boat onto terra firma was a strange feeling after 7 weeks on the water. None of us could stand properly. Falling in to the arms of friends, family and press, we were soon covered in champagne and trying to take in what was behind us. EDF Energy arrived 5 hours later. It was a remarkable feat that 2 boats should be so close after 3000miles of ocean and 7 weeks of bizarre weather.

The 2005 race from La Gomera to Antigua was a record breaking year. The weather in the North Atlantic was the worst for 200 years for that time of year. On average there are 11 storms during the period of our crossing; we had to deal with 27!

Unfortunately some teams were not so fortunate, 6 boats sank, with 12 crewmembers being rescued by passing ships or one of the two dedicated support vessels. It was fortunate that all rescued crews were unharmed

Throughout the race our emotions were a roller coaster, we worked as a team to understand, encourage and support each other kept morale high. There were never tears but plenty of laughter. We came through what many couldn't begin to imagine. Our ship's motto was '*Come back friends or not at all*' – we made it!

Since returning I have not been in a boat and have managed to resist the offers from Clydesdale rowing club to join a novice crew.

Many thanks go to the entire Scottish rowing community, but in particular Clydesdale Rowing club members and coaches. No one laughed when I joined the club and revealed I had to learn to row so I could cross the Atlantic. Everyone I met was friendly and so many people generously sacrificed their time to help improve my appalling technique!