

The crossing

by Andy Dappen

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Greg Spooner '01, Dylan LeValley '05, Brad Vickers '05, and Jordan Hanssen '04 cross the finish line at Bishop's Rock, the southwestern-most point in the U.K., winning the Shepherd Ocean Fours Rowing Race.

After 18 months of preparation and 10 weeks at sea, after terrifying storms and heartbreaking sunsets, after misery and euphoria, four Puget Sound alumni rowed their 29-foot fiberglass boat up to a pier in the U.K. and into the record books



August 21, 2006

We saw the lighthouse first. Then, after more rowing, the cliffs. In their own time, fields, houses, trees, and even people appeared. We treated each new sighting like it was the most exciting happening in months. As we approached the harbor, a sport boat rushed out to meet us; then a camera boat; then locals in their own boats; then tour boats, whale boats, and the pilot boat with the harbor master. Later, when we rounded the breakwater, we could see the whole town of Falmouth. A crowd was cheering. Cannon fired from the castle. Big ships were blowing horns. There were 200 people and close to 50 friends and family members at the dock and pretty soon we were staggering on land, hugging, crying—and eating, eating everything in sight.

It was more than the end of a historic 3,290 mile row across the North Atlantic, a body of water known for 30-foot waves, hurricane-force winds, and for sinking the *Titanic*. It was the end of 71 days divided into interminable two-hour shifts of rowing, sleeping, rowing, sleeping. It was the end of settling into bedding that was always wet, of rowing through rain squalls that felt like blasts from a BB machine gun, or of waiting out storms while lying like sardines in a sealed chamber the size of a refrigerator. But for all these hardships, the crew says the challenges of preparing for the journey easily eclipsed the difficulty of the row itself.

The seeds of this epic journey germinated in November 2004, when Jordan Hanssen '04, one of the Loggers who helped Puget Sound clinch four consecutive Northwest Conference rowing championships, saw a poster in Seattle announcing a rowing race from New York to the United Kingdom. He was smitten by the notion and, although family and friends worried whether this scheme would provide an express ride to Davey Jones' locker, he viewed the race as the adventure of a lifetime.

Hanssen was soon on the phone with former UPS teammate Brad Vickers '05, asking if Vickers was up for something big. Even in the rowing community, rowing an ocean teeters on the edge of insanity, but Vickers didn't

Ocean-rowing history 101

Rowing an ocean sounds suicidal to the uninitiated, but a surprising number of adventurers have taken to the sea in rowboats. To date, 276 expeditions have attempted ocean crossings, and nearly two thirds of them have succeeded. Most of the other third safely aborted partway through their crossing. Surprisingly, only six lives have been lost during the sport's 110-year history.

Two Norwegians, George Harboe and Gabriel Samuelsen, kicked off this adventure sport in 1896 when they piloted an open rowboat across the North Atlantic as a publicity stunt. Reportedly, they rowed from Manhattan to the Isle of Scilly (U.K.) in 55.5 days—a time that has not been bested. They then spent an additional five days rowing to France.

The next successful ocean row was not completed until 70 years later, when two Brits, John Ridgway and Chay Blyth, rowed from Cape Cod to Ireland. In 1971, Swedish solo rower Anders Svedlund devoted 64 days to crossing the Indian Ocean. In 1972, British gluttons for pain John Fairfax and Sylvia Cook claimed the first Pacific crossing, spending a staggering 361 days rowing the 8,041 miles between San Francisco and Australia.

The distinction of the longest row, in miles, goes to Jim Shekhdar of Great Britain, who rowed 10,652 miles and was at sea 273 days, rowing solo from Peru to Australia.

Interesting combinations of related people have also rowed an ocean together—husbands and wives, cousins, twin brothers, uncle and nephew, mother and daughter, father and son, and mother and son. Rowers from Zimbabwe, Turkey, Italy, Guatemala, Barbados, Hungary, and China all have completed ocean rows.

The modern era of ocean rowing began in 1982 as rowers embraced newer boats designed to increase safety, newer technologies that increased the odds of successful emergency rescues, and newer equipment that improved living conditions at sea. In the next 14 years, another 29 expeditions took to the oars as adventurers crossed new stretches of water, vied for gender distinction, or made crossings in the name of their country.

The advent of formalized ocean-rowing races using “class,” or same-design, boats bolstered interest and participation in the sport. In 1997, 29 boats manned by two-person teams raced between the Canary Islands and Barbados. These races on the mid-Atlantic have continued on a two-year cycle and the sponsoring group—Woodvale Events—started organizing even more ambitious races. They’ve added a race across the Indian Ocean. And this year’s race across the colder, rougher North Atlantic was the first-ever Ocean-Four (four-person) race.

Not only did the UPS crew win the North Atlantic race from the U.S. to U.K., they have earned several slots in the record books. They are the first Americans to row from the U.S. to Europe and the first American winners of an ocean-rowing race. They have also logged the longest recorded row of the North Atlantic: The point-to-point distance of their journey was 3,290 statute miles, but with vagaries of winds and storms, the Logger crew rowed roughly 3,800 miles. — AD

dismiss his former teammate. He said they needed to meet. “We got together and spent 10 hours discussing every part of the project,” recalls Vickers. “At that point we committed to rowing an ocean together. When, where, how—these questions were still unanswered.”

Not for long, though. The two soon decided the North Atlantic race that Hanssen had read about, which was scheduled for the summer of 2006, was the right venue. It was the first-ever four-person rowing race, and Hanssen and Vickers believed four people would be more capable of conquering the staggering number of chores involved in preparing for the journey. Plus, more people would make a long crossing in a small boat more interesting.

“We knew we wanted former UPS rowers,” says Vickers. “This would be a stressful race, and we wanted to do it with people we really knew and trusted.”

The two started recruiting teammates and found that UPS offered a fertile field of similarly off-kilter dreamers. Among them was Greg Spooner ’01, who had served as the men’s novice rowing coach for a year after graduating.

Meanwhile Dylan LeValley ’05, a multiyear varsity rower for the Loggers, was cursed with the genes of his father, a man who for many years organized eco-tours to far corners of the Western Hemisphere and Africa. LeValley was also cursed by his mother when he told her what he was contemplating. “That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard from you,” she told him. But wanderlust trumped maternal apprehension. Along with the other three UPS rowers, LeValley took out a loan for \$10,000 and added it to the coffers of a venture the four were calling OAR (Ocean Adventure Racing) Northwest.

These guys must be crazy

The \$40,000 of personal seed money only covered a fraction of their expenses. The foam-core composite rowing boats made by Woodvale are the stock craft used for ocean races. A bare-bones boat, painted only in primer and featuring a quiver of tie-down cleats and a few waterproof hatches sealing off the sleeping quarters, costs \$30,000. Delivering the boat to the West Coast would run another \$6,000, and a trailer for the craft would cost \$4,000.

The boat would then need to be outfitted to the standards mandated by the race organizers, using a fathom-long equipment list: strobe lights on the deck to make the small boat visible, a sea anchor to ride out storms, an active radar to see oncoming traffic, a radar reflector to

make the boat visible to big ships, rowing gates and seats, solar panels and batteries, life jackets, survival suits, safety tethers, distress signals, flares, waterproof storage containers, medical supplies, compasses, ocean charts, tools, boat repair items, spare electronic parts, an emergency-position beacon, a tracking beacon, life raft, fog horn, sextant, GPS unit, VHF radio, satellite phone, laptop computer, stove, fuel, personal gear, bedding, and service manuals for everything. There would need to be an emergency supply of water and stills to desalinate the three to eight quarts of water each rower would drink each day. And there would need to be food. Lots of food. Enough to supply each rower with 5,500 calories a day for 100 days. With all these provisions, the 800-pound boat would plump up to 3,000 pounds.

Next they would need \$40,000 for the race-entry fee. And funds for training, shipping the boat east, flying back East, flying home after the race, and shipping the boat home. There would be the cost of marketing their adventure to attract financial support, and the cost of living while they prepared for, marketed, and financed their dream. The total cost of the Atlantic race would exceed a quarter-million dollars.

The four attacked the task like they were launching a business. They rented a house together in Seattle to shave living costs, establish a headquarters, warehouse equipment, sustain communication, and build team unity. They cold called potential sponsors, financial supporters, and sources of information. They built a Web site, crafted marketing materials, attracted reams of media coverage, and established themselves as a nonprofit organization.

They also created a higher purpose for their journey. The team formalized a relationship with the American Lung Association of Washington in the summer of 2005 so that half of all donations went to the charity and half went to financing the row. (See *Strong Lungs Pull for Failing Ones*, page 29.)

Getting to the starting line

The team members drew different lessons from the 18-month preparation. Brad Vickers saw it as education: "I can't imagine we would have learned this much had we gone back to school." LeValley noted the single-minded focus required to pull off big dreams: "There's nothing we did that anyone willing to ignore their friends and family, operate on no sleep, and abuse their health couldn't accomplish."

And Hanssen came to appreciate the "it-takes-a-village" support required to tackle monster projects: "Four people don't row across the Atlantic."

The support the four garnered was diverse and widespread. Acquaintances and family donated time, expertise, money, Web services, photographic services, weather forecasting services, and moral support. Some 50 businesses listed on the OAR Northwest Web site gave money, equipment, food, expertise, or some mixture of each.

LeValley joked about how their ability to, uh, abuse people's generosity also helped. For days at a time, for example, they would take over the shop of Emerald Harbor Marine and ask questions about outfitting their boat with water makers, a solar charging system, and navigation and communication systems. "The owner would tell us, 'I don't want to help you, but if I don't, you're gonna kill yourselves.'"

They didn't kill themselves. The four—some meticulously outfitted and row-tested the *James Robert Hanssen* (named for Jordan Hanssen's dad, who died of a massive asthma attack in 1985) in the Pacific before she was shipped to New York. On training rows they became physically and mentally prepared for the labor and life ahead. Living together on land, they learned how to support and compensate for one another, as well as how to communicate and vent. Through experience and research, they knew what they were up against, and they developed daily routines and racing tactics to ensure not only that they would become the first Americans to cross the North Atlantic, but that they would defeat the other three boats in the race.

Dave Spooner, Greg's father, says that despite their victory and the success of their historic row, the greatest pride he felt was in the guys' ability to get to the starting line. "At hundreds of places along the way this thing could have crumbled and fallen apart. They took what they learned from UPS, the determination and cohesion from their crew experience, and applied it to this."

The elder Spooner expressed tremendous admiration for the team's accomplishment. A few days after the racers arrived in Falmouth, he said, "I was on the rowboat helping to retrieve equipment we'd be taking home. I immediately found out that moving in that tiny living compartment, finding anything, doing something functional—it's almost impossible. What life and conditions were like out on the sea in that compartment is inconceivable to me."



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Seventy-one days at the oars

Everything about rowing an ocean is inconceivable to those of us who are land-bound. What follows are excerpts from diary entries that Hanssen, Vickers, Spooner, and LeValley posted on their Web site—a site that saw more than 60,000 people per day tracking the progress of the *JR Hanssen*.

June 11, 2006

Our second night at sea. Condolences to Team Sevenoaks, who broke their rudder and dropped out of the race. Much of what happens on the ocean is out of our control, and their early departure takes nothing from the tremendous accomplishment of reaching the start. Pulling away from New York last night was so emotional for all of us. As we watched the sun set over the city, we realized that when we woke up there would be nothing. We can finally begin to take stock in ourselves and our undertaking. A tropical storm is brewing in the Gulf, and forecasters have it headed our way.

June 12

This is the first time I have been well enough to concentrate on writing in the cabin. It seems to take Brad and me about three days to get over seasickness. Last night we saw our first sunset out of sight of land. It lit the whole sky orange and the moon rose behind us with a deep yellow-red hue. — Jordan

June 14

Two hours on (rowing) and two hours off (resting) seems to work fine most of the day, but when evening rolls around there is that one brutal night shift that redefines pain. The hardest part is working in your mind’s haze. Your mind may be wandering, but the pain is very real. — Jordan

June 15

We made it through a horrendous night. The wind [from tropical storm Alberto] was making noises I didn’t even know wind could make. The seas are still messy, but there are no longer waves crashing over the boat. While last night was scary, it was a confidence booster. It was rough to have all four of us in the cabin, but after a couple of hours we got comfortable, came up with a ventilation system, and even had some laughs (albeit, nervous ones). — Dylan

June 17

We had a moment of perfection last night. The stars were out, with no moon or clouds. There was no horizon and the water melded with the sky. With each stroke our oars lit up the water with

the brightest phosphorescence. With every wave our boat lifted up, and the ocean around it lit up like a bright green Milky Way. It was rowing among the stars. — Jordan

June 18

It’s not the adjustment to the living requirements that is so profound but the adjustment to movement. Our top speed rowing is about three knots, or just over what you could walk at a fast pace. It took us 12 hours of rowing yesterday to make any headway at all, and that is a long time to row without going anywhere. It’s humbling to live at this pace. — Brad

June 22

We’ve spent most of the last two to three days battling our way due east, watching the lead over the fleet continue to shrink, as south winds and choppy south seas impede our usual good progress. Many a text message has come in wondering why we forge our own path toward Portugal. The sole purpose is to get to the Gulf Stream. The current is fast, and it is well worth the lightning storms, awkward waves, backward currents and torrential rain. Yesterday afternoon we adjusted course to the NE, and it was finally our chance to cash in on the miserable rowing from before. Since then, we’ve been surfing the waves that thwarted our progress. — Greg

June 23

A pod of right whales surfaced off the starboard side of our boat last evening. They moved effortlessly past us, their undulating movements making our rowing seem uncivilized in comparison. No acknowledgment, no curiosity on their part. They had much more important business to attend to. We, on the other hand, stood silent, mouths agape searching for words. — Jordan

June 24

Last night we had no moon. 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, floating. — Jordan

June 29

We knew there would be miserable times out here (e.g., Alberto). But we also envisioned 150-mile days surfing the Gulf Stream with 10-foot seas and 20-knot winds driving us directly toward Falmouth. The reality is that nothing out here is easy. We've had 10 days of beam seas and headwinds. Today is our first day of tailwinds since day two, but we are in an area of backward current. When it's calm, it's hot enough to leave us begging for a tree to hide under. Fortunately, there has not been a day without the positive as well. There is always something amazing around us—even on the painful days, we can watch the dolphins or turtles. — Dylan

July 5

Rain began with a prelude of small drops and some lightning in the distance. In 10 minutes thick drops drove the waves into submission. It stung, oppressive, overwhelming. The lightning, now overhead, exploded around us. Our eyes seared and were then submerged back into darkness. The rain continued throughout today. I believe this is one of the most stunning experiences out here. What you don't see at night is the impact of the rain drops on the water. One drop hitting the water, multiplied by billions, calms the sea. — Greg

July 10

Our night shifts are long if you don't talk your way through them, and we all have fallen asleep while rowing at some point during the crossing. Dylan came up with this game where we ask an in-depth question on the first shift and respond to it on the second. These questions lead to further conversation and, all of a sudden, the 10-minute-warning call is being made to the two sleeping rowers in the stern cabin. Some of the questions we have discussed: If you could no longer live in the U.S., what country would you live in and why? If you could be the CEO of any company, which company and what changes would you implement? Describe the greatest baseball game ever. Describe your dream home. Even after spending a year living and working together on the project, we continue to come up with new topics of conversation. — Brad

July 12

Today we had the most amazing wildlife experience of the trip. Greg and Jordan sighted some dolphin-like animals in the distance, but as they approached we realized they were much larger (up to 30 feet), had large, curved dorsal fins, and

Strong lungs pull for failing ones

When he was three years old, Jordan Hanssen watched his father die from an asthma attack. Although he developed the disease himself, Hanssen outgrew it. His athletic life now is a willful act of defiance against an affliction that cost him dearly.

Because of this history, OAR Northwest approached the American Lung Association of Washington (ALAW) during the summer of 2005, asking whether they might help raise awareness and money for the nonprofit. A deal was struck: Half of the donations given to OAR Northwest would go to the American Lung Association, half to financing the expedition.

As part of their campaign to increase awareness of lung diseases, the team named their boat after Jordan's father. They also set a very steep goal of raising \$300,000 for the organization.

"These are four very special guys," said Paul Payton, a spokesperson for the ALAW. "They're committed to something much bigger than rowing the Atlantic."

At the time *Arches* went to press, the total raised for ALAW is unclear. With all the hoopla centered on the team as it completed the race, the volunteer staff supporting the racers will be unable to total the contributions for several weeks. In rough figures, however, the team that rowed the Atlantic may be only halfway across their fundraising ocean. "It certainly isn't from a lack of trying," says Payton, "They've bled all the way through this journey encouraging people to give."

The foursome is not done fundraising just because they've made landfall, Dylan LeValley insists. "We made a commitment to the ALAW—in the months ahead, as we travel around telling the story of our journey, we'll keep promoting the importance of the ALAW's work."

Focusing on such afflictions as asthma, lung cancer, and emphysema, the ALAW conducts research on preventing these diseases, works to prevent tobacco use among youth, advocates for greater control of indoor and outdoor pollutants, and helps those afflicted with lung disease manage their condition.

— AD

To contribute to OAR Northwest and the American Lung Association of Washington, visit either www.oarnorthwest.com or www.alaw.org/oar, or call 800-732-9339.

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we were flat-faced [pilot whales]. They proceeded to come up to the boat, around 40 of them, and played at the surface right next to the boat for 15 minutes! Why did they choose us? What made the JR Hanssen so interesting? We wouldn't have witnessed this without the miserable days rowing against relentless current. Worth every stroke. — Dylan and Greg

July 14

An oncoming storm made for a rough start to the shift, as Dylan and I were greeted with rain, wind, and instantly cold extremities. These conditions make it easy to miss home.

The current has shifted against us. Our speed a few hours earlier was over three knots per hour; now it's less than one. I can view the sea with anger and frustration or I can accept the sea on her terms. Our little sliver of fiberglass civilization is blessed to be this far along [more than halfway]. We do not have the strength to fight the sea, so we submit. Record or not, win or not, both of which we want dearly, do not matter to the ocean. She decides when we cross. — Jordan

July 17

This morning the clouds broke. For the first time in 36 hours I was warm and drying out.

Surrounded by dark clouds threatening my respite, I cradled this moment. — Jordan

July 21

With just under 1,000 miles to go, visions of dry land motivate us to keep bending the oars. It's the in-between stuff that is the difficult part of living in cramped quarters with three other dudes. Bathing, laundry, tooth brushing, and facilities (i.e., the bucket) take on a whole new significance. Your body begins to break down or fall apart without keeping up on the basics. Your teeth will ache, your jock will itch, your clothes will smell, and the cramp of all intestinal cramps will never leave you. — Greg

July 26

It is hard because we are tired. It is hard because we miss those we love. It is hard because being on a boat with four guys is difficult. It is easy to get caught up in home, but we must feast instead upon the present and remember each dolphin we see jump, each man-of-war that floats idly by—happenings, which on day 47, seem commonplace. We must remember the camaraderie that only comes through working toward a single goal, as well as the 40 shades of blue, phosphorescence that trails the boat, and stars I have never seen and will not see on land. — Jordan

July 27

A 700-mile celebration meal is just around the corner. (We're eating fancy every 100 miles until the finish). Human life is picking up. Airplanes that were so far in the distance now appear to fly low over us, initiating descents into their respective airports. Shipping traffic is on the rise. There still may be three weeks left on our journey, but we can taste and feel it—civilization. — Greg

August 5

I turned 24 out here on the magnificent ocean blue. Some of our rations included a few MREs. While these are not culinary masterpieces, they are much different than our normal food, and this makes them a great treat. I chose the vegetable manicotti. In the package came a small piece of wheat bread, a rare commodity and something I have been missing a great deal. I got creative with the bread: A packet of sugar, two packets of cream cheese, some fruit snacks saved from breakfast, eight Fig Newtons, and I had my birthday cake. It was as memorable a birthday as I could ask for. — Jordan

August 9

We can't seem to find our way east toward the

finish line. An abnormal high-pressure system to the north is creating strong headwinds. We're being blown south and are in danger of drifting below the bottom of the finish line. This is creating a mental challenge none of us ever imagined. While the highs and lows of the weather remain consistent, the highs and lows of our psyche jump from hour to hour based on wind shifts and sun breaks. — Greg

August 13

Headwinds continue to stifle progress. We just set the sea anchor for the third time in 24 hours so as to dampen our drift rate toward the southern boundary of the finish line. — Greg

August 18 (as told to Arches)

After 68.97 days at sea, we completed the race this afternoon, crossing the finish line more than 300 miles ahead of the nearest competitor. [The men then rowed unassisted another two days to Falmouth.] Emotionally, this was the most powerful experience of my life: After 18 months of preparation and 10 weeks of rowing, we accomplished what we planned. There were days recently in which we've rowed only five miles, or we've gone backwards. The uncertainty of whether the sea would let us finish was wearing on us. These feelings at the finish line were so powerful and positive that the four of us were crying. Which must have looked strange because the finish line is an imaginary meridian passing through Bishop's Rock, 28 miles off the southwestern tip of Great Britain, and our surroundings looked no different than the middle of the Atlantic. Rowing conditions are favorable and we still have food for several days, so it felt right to carry on and become the first boat to row from mainland U.S. to mainland U.K. — Dylan

Finally, after 10 weeks at sea, with the smells of land in the air, they stopped rowing and drifted, taking stock of the experience.

“We learned there was nothing glamorous about being in the middle of the ocean in a rowboat,” said LeValley. “You're always hungry. If you're not wet, you're probably too hot. Still, years from now I doubt we'll think much about the discomfort. The stars, the sunsets, the dolphins, and what we accomplished—those things, I suspect, will stick with us.”

Wenatchee-based Andy Dappen wrote about renegade wine-grape grower Warren Moyles '54 in the summer 2006 edition of Arches.

OAR Northwest, by the numbers

- Cost of the expedition: roughly \$300,000
- Remaining debt: substantial; still being calculated at press time
- Cost of stripped boat: \$30,000
- Additional cost of outfitting boat: \$50,000
- Maximum winds experienced: 50 mph
- Point-to-point distance traveled: 3,290 statute miles
- Actual distance rowed: 3,800 miles
- Energy consumed per day: 5,500 to 6,000 calories
- Body weight lost: Vickers, 25 pounds; LeValley, 32 pounds; Hanssen, 35 pounds; Spooner, 48 pounds.