

A brief history of Atlantic rowing

- It was over 100 years ago that the first Atlantic crossing was completed in a rowing boat. At the time, two Norwegian immigrants, George Harbo and Frank Samuelson were working as fishermen in the United States. They believed that they could complete the crossing from New York to the Isles of Scilly and then cash in on the lucrative lecture tour circuit that they hoped would follow. They ploughed their entire fortunes into an 18-foot whaling boat called the *Richard K Fox* and on 6th June 1896 set off from the east coast of the United States. Despite capsizing on two different occasions, they eventually arrived at the Isles of Scilly 55 days later. This record for a west to east crossing of the Atlantic still stands to this day.
- The first men to row the Atlantic this century were two British paratroopers, John Ridgway and Sir Chay Blyth. After less than four months of preparation, the pair set sail from Cape Cod on 4th June 1966 aboard a 20-foot dory named *English Rose III*. 91 days later they set ashore on the Aran Isles, off the coast of Ireland.
- Three years later Britain had cause for further celebration. Inspired by the achievements of Ridgway and Blyth, ex-paratrooper and former member of the SAS Tom McClean decided to tackle the Atlantic by himself. With little previous experience of the sea, McClean set out from Newfoundland on 17th May 1969 in a 20-foot open rowing boat. 71 days later, he landed at Blacksod Bay in Ireland, and in so doing became the first man ever to row the Atlantic single-handed. His battle with the ocean did not stop there, however. He returned to Newfoundland in 1982, this time sailing across the Atlantic in a boat measuring just 9 foot 9 inches long. In completing this journey, he assumed the world record for the crossing of the Atlantic in the smallest vessel. When this achievement was taken from McClean by one of his contemporaries, he returned to the Atlantic for a third time and reclaimed the record by sailing the route in a boat measuring just 7 foot long. Still not completely satisfied, he returned for a final time in 1987 and reclaimed the single-handed rowing record, this time completing the journey from Newfoundland to Ireland in just 55 days.
- Three decades later, Sir Chay Blyth announced his intention to organise the first ever ocean rowing race, an event that changed the history of rowing. Teams came from all over the world and on 12th October 1997, 30 double-handed teams set out from Los Gigantes, Tenerife. They were racing in identical 24-foot plywood rowing boats and competing on equal terms over the 3000-mile voyage to Barbados. The race was a huge success and was won by New Zealanders, Rob Hamill and Phil Stubbs in a staggering time of 41 days.
- In that same year, the former mayor of Chipping Norton, Jan Meek, was told by her son, Daniel, that he intended to row the Atlantic with a friend. Both Daniel and his rowing partner, Jason, were studying at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. However, after a while Jason was forced to withdraw from the project due to study commitments. Despite being 52 years of age, Jan decided to replace Jason, and so began a 100-day epic that started in the Canary Islands and eventually finished in Barbados. The mother and son team came last in the race that they had entered, but it soon became obvious that this trip was more about spending quality time together than securing a high race position.

- The 1997 Atlantic Rowing Race was so successful, that Blyth decided to repeat it in 2001. The major headline to emerge from this second race was the story of Debra Veal. She and her husband, Andrew, set out from San Juan, Tenerife, on 7th October 2001, along with the other competitors in the race. However, on the eighth day of the competition her husband started experiencing certain difficulties and after only two weeks of rowing he was evacuated and diagnosed as suffering from a phobia of the sea. Despite the withdrawal of her partner, Debra decided to continue with the race. Her crossing of the Atlantic was punctuated by isolation, a cracked oar and a near miss with a tanker, but despite coming joint last in the race, her determination to overcome adversity earned her a place in the nation's hearts. Debra Veal was the eleventh woman to row the Atlantic.
- In January 2001 Diana Hoff, a medical practitioner from Norway, became the oldest woman to row the Atlantic. At the age of 55 she followed in the footsteps of her husband, Stein, and daughter, Elizabeth, and set off from Tenerife in *Star Atlantic II*, arriving in Barbados 113 days later. Her arrival on 8th January culminated in a 24-hour battle with strong winds and fierce currents. Having landed on dry land, she was forced to lie down, as four months in the rowing position had rendered her temporarily unable to walk.
- **The absolute rowing record for an Atlantic crossing is currently held by a French team. In 1992 a crew of 11 Frenchmen aboard *Le Mondial* attempted the east to west crossing. They completed the journey from the Canary Islands to Martinique in the West Indies in just 35 days.**
- There have so far been 29 attempts to row the Atlantic from the west to the east, all following similar routes to the Pink Lady Atlantic First team. Of these 29, 19 have failed and 6 men have died. In 1966 David Johnstone and John Hoare were declared missing after 84 days at sea, when their boat *Puffin* was found upturned and abandoned some 1200 miles into the journey. Kenneth Kerr and Andrew Wilson were also lost at sea within a month of each other, when they set out from Newfoundland in 1980. In 1996 Peter Bird was declared missing at sea, 69 days into his west to east attempt. And most recently Nenad Belic, a doctor from Chicago, set off from Cape Cod in May 2001 and died 151 days later, when his boat disappeared during a storm off the coast of Ireland.

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