

CURTIS BANKS X SEA CHANGE SPORT JULY 2020

Foreword

The below update was written before I received the tragic news about the passing of Greg Kingston. Alongside Claire Fazio, Greg was the driving force for Curtis Banks coming aboard the challenge and offering the vital sponsorship support that the business is providing. As the first company to reach out and believe in what I am trying to achieve, I owe so much to Curtis Banks and Greg was, and will remain, a huge part of that legacy. His enthusiasm for the challenge was endless and he made me feel at all times like he, and the business, were 100% behind me. It is testament to his giving nature that he personally sponsored the row as well as bringing Curtis Banks on board. This he did as a wedding anniversary gift for his dear wife Kat. I cannot imagine the loss that you are all feeling following Greg's death. I know he has worked alongside you all for many years and, if the short time I have known him is anything to go by, his absence will be felt strongly. I shall continue to work hard to honour Greg's unwavering support and I wish each of you well in these testing time.

Training Steps up a Gear - First Overnight Row

As July comes to an end, we're fast approaching the 'six months to go' mark for the start of the challenge. Six months might sound like rather a long time, but with so much still to do and learn, I'm confident this period will fly by. Having lost a couple of months of on-the-water training due to lockdown, my key focus recently has been getting out in the boat to develop my knowledge and understanding of the vessel, how it reacts to differing conditions, and how my body copes with the requirements of endurance. I'm now at a point where I feel confident rowing alone during the day, heading up to the mouth of the River Crouch and out towards the wind farm that sits just beyond in the North Sea. The next step was to take on my first 24-hour row. What an adventure this turned out to be!

11.30am, Friday. Setting out from Burnham marina in reasonably calm conditions, my plan was to head along the Whitaker channel. This is a route I've rowed previously. My turnaround-point was just off the coast, near to a place called Courtsend. Once I reached here, I'd turn 180 degrees and return along the same route. The course was not the focus for this row, I planned to maintain a strict adherence to a 2-hours-on, 2-hours-off shift pattern, the intention being to emulate life at sea. Before departure, I'd put together the following passage plan:

Low tide – 09.55 am High tide – 16.02 pm Low tide – 10.36 pm High tide – 04.33 am	Departure time – 11.30 am End of first shift – 1.30 pm (lunch) Second shift - 3.30 pm – 5.30 pm (snack) Third shift – 7.30 pm – 9.30 pm (dinner) Fourth shift – 11.30 pm – 1.30 am (snack) Fifth shift – 3.30 am – 5.30 am (breakfast) Sixth shift 7.30 am – 9.30 am (snack) Potentially a final shift around 11am depending on location.
Wind – 11 knots Friday – up to 16 knots Saturday with gusting winds at 25-30 knots	
Sunset – 9.00 pm Sunrise – 5.15 am	

The first two hours passed quickly and at 1.30pm I dropped anchor and had a spot of lunch. After navigating a rather large passing ship in the river, I was underway for the second shift by 3.30pm. As this stint neared an end at 5.30pm, I'd made good headway along the Whitaker Channel and was just off a location known as Foulness Sands. I'd rowed slightly wide of the red and green buoys that mark the channel out to sea, but figured I had enough of a margin and put my anchor down.

After attending to a few jobs on the boat, I sat down to have a snack. The next rest period wouldn't start until 9.30pm, but I'd decided to have dinner to ensure I had sufficient sustenance to row through the night. With about 45 minutes of the current rest period still to go, I decided to get my head down for half an hour. Lying in the cabin at the front of the boat, the water rocked me rather substantially and the equipment on board rattled around making it difficult to relax. That said, even resting your muscles without sleep is important, so I stuck it out. My alarm was set for 7.15pm, giving me 15 minutes to prep for the start of the next shift

at 7.30pm. As I stepped into the middle cabin ready to go out on deck, I noticed something unusual in the water. It looked like a grass mound. Surely not, I was almost in the North Sea. What could it be? I stepped out onto deck and realised immediately my error. I'd dropped anchor 50m too far south of the channel. Foulness Sands is an area that at low tide, is above sea level. The water had turned whilst I was resting and I was now completely beached. With approx. 2 inches of water between me and the sand, I was totally stuck. Tidal periods last 6 hours. I was here for the long haul.

Slightly perturbed, I called Charlie (who is managing my water training). 'How's it going, Tor - just thinking of getting ready to come and see you'. I explained my predicament and he asked me to send through my coordinates so he could see where I was. 'Slight problem with that location, Tori - it's Ministry of Defence land. In fact, it's a firing range so if you see a red flag pop up to your left make sure you duck' he said laughing.

Jokes aside, he was spot on. I had in fact beached my boat on a military practice area. Conscious that I very much shouldn't be here, and that other boats may radio in a distress call if they spotted me, my first ever VHF radio call was to Dover Coastguard to let them know I was safe and well and intended to sit it out until the tide turned. This wouldn't happen till 1.30am. Perhaps now would be a good time for dinner after all!



Being a solo rower, people often ask if I worry about getting bored. In fact, there is so much to do and think about that there's never a dull moment. It's constant management of equipment on board and conditions outside the boat. Is the radio on channel 16, have I turned on my AIS so other boats can see where I am, when did I last eat, have I had enough water, is the boat secure, what does the weather look like for the next 12-24 hours, how far have I travelled, where do I need to get to and so on and so on. Even with all those checks done, the ever-changing nature of the conditions around you mean you're constantly updating input. There isn't much room for rest. Nervous about having wound up in my current predicament, I still couldn't sleep despite now having an extended period in which to do so.

00.45am, Saturday. It's pitch black. The wind has picked up and is howling hard against the hull of the boat. I peered over the side of the deck and felt slightly concerned that I was surrounded by dry sand, despite hoping to depart just 45 minutes later. Being

12.5 hours in and still not having slept, I decided to have a lie down. No sooner had I done so than I heard water rushing around the boat. Within 15 minutes I was afloat, and slightly terrified as to how quickly the tide came in once it started. I let the tide rise fully to ensure my rudder and centreboards were clear of the sand. The wind was causing a considerable swell and I was incredibly nervous about lifting anchor. Being truthful, I was scared. I tried to remind myself that the boat always feels steadier once underway, and that there was worse weather due to blow in. The sooner I left, the sooner I'd get back into the more sheltered protection of the river mouth.

This was to be my first experience of night rowing. With zero visibility you're reliant on the Garmin navigation unit in the cabin. Unfortunately, the cabin is behind you when rowing. You row a little and then let the boat drift whilst you lean in to check that you're on course. It sounds reasonably straightforward, but the reality is that when the wind and waves are pushing you in every direction, there's never a particularly good time to stop rowing. There's also the very real concern that you can't afford to drift too far when you're surrounded by large metal buoys, and side on to an offshore wind farm. I was using my autohelm to steer the rudder of the boat. This mechanical level holds the rudder on a selected compass bearing. However, to work it requires you to be moving. If you stop rowing in a head wind, you stop moving forwards. Each time I stopped, the boat would slow, drift slightly, move off course and the autohelm alarm would go off.

I dragged my anchor up and put it away as quickly as possible, conscious that as soon as it lifted from the sand I was adrift. Once on the oars, my routine for two hours went something like this: row as hard as possible as the swell hits the sides of the boat, tilting me sharply from side to side and knocking the oars out of place; lean backwards into the cabin and squint at the Garmin, checking for buoys or other obstacles on screen; look in front of the boat over my shoulder to see if I could spot the flashing lights on the top of the buoys seen on screen; set the autohelm to head in their direction; look at what other shore lights I could see once in position that would help as visual markers to keep me on track; row as hard as possible; repeat. I could feel the adrenaline rising and felt anything but tired. It's a strange experience to be in a situation where you're so far out of your comfort zone but have no choices to calm the situation. Dropping anchor again would only prolong the process, you simply have to keep a level head and continue moving. Passing through the final set of red and green buoys that mark the channel, I knew I was coming into the river mouth. I immediately felt the benefit that the narrower channel and riverbanks offer against the swell. As the wind was still gusting and the two hour mark approached, I was in a reasonably exposed spot where it wasn't possible to anchor. I rowed on. After nearly 2.5 hours I'd reached a sufficiently safe place to stop. I dropped anchor and felt completely exhausted.

3.50am, Saturday - You attach the anchor to the bow line which comes out the front of the boat. Given the front of the boat is about 2m away from the deck, if you tied the anchor to this line and let it go, you wouldn't be able to pull it back in. As such, you also have a retrieval line. At around 4am, I noticed that my retrieval line was slack. If the anchor is fully extended out the front of the boat, this line should sit taught. When the boat stops, it spins around to face into the wind. As the boat had moved on this occasion, the line had run underneath the boat rather than out of the front. This meant the boat was being held side on into the wind which makes for a rather choppy time. The anchor line was too tight under the boat to pull back in and start again. What now? I decided I was too tired to problem solve the issue immediately, that I was safe, albeit rocking, and that a solution would be clearer after 20 minutes of sleep. I lay down in the bunk. I'd now rowed for 6 hours and been awake for 22 hours, but I couldn't relax. There was a problem to be fixed and my mind couldn't switch off until it had been addressed.

After 10 minutes of watching the boat direction move on the Garmin monitor, I noticed I'd swung around sufficiently to a point where I felt confident that if I had another go I could get the anchor up and drop it out the other side of the boat to allow the lines to extend correctly. I was right. That said, fatigued, hungry and fresh off two of the scariest hours of rowing I've done - it was no easy feat. Hauling the metal claw off the seabed, back into the boat and back off the boat again took every ounce of energy I had left. With the anchor safely redeployed I crawled back into the cabin. For the first time in the outing, I managed to sleep. A whole 30 minutes!

The shift pattern dictated that I depart at 5.30am. Having not finished with the anchor until gone 4.30am, I decided to class the outing as a three hour 'on' period and take 2 hours off from 4.30 till 6.30. Even with the change I'd still have time for another 2 shifts, meaning 10 hours of rowing in total. Feeling mildly refreshed, I made porridge and was back on the oars for 6.25am. By now the wind was gusting 25 knots and the tide was against me. Despite rowing as hard as I could, I was averaging a speed of 1 knot (about a fifth of the boat speed when rowing with the tide in good conditions). It's fairly soul destroying to put so much effort into a task that feels to be paying so little dividends. During the course of the shift I travelled some of the way back down towards

the marina and by the time I dropped anchor at 8.30am, could see the end point. I considered continuing on but reminded myself that sticking to the shift pattern was the main goal.

8.30am, Saturday - Once again, sleep evaded me. However, the benefit of this rest period was that the tide was due to turn by the time I got back on the oars. Against strong winds, I headed in towards the safety of my berth. Coming into the marina is always a difficult task, you're travelling backwards on your own surrounded by boats. Today, the south westerly winds that had been slowing my progress along the river were blowing right up the approach of the marina and pushed me in at a rather stressful 2.5 knots without even rowing. I narrowly avoided a number of expensive looking vessels and moored up around midday. Just over 24 hours after I departed, with 10 hours rowing and 30 minutes sleep under my belt, I'd made it back safely.



Throughout the whole experience I tried to remind myself that the Atlantic would have bigger challenges in store for me, and that the full range of emotions I was experiencing were essentially their funeral pyre. Once you've felt scared about something the first time, it is never as daunting the second time. It's these training rows that I need to push my tolerance and experience levels ahead of the real thing. I certainly slept well back in London on Saturday night!

The next challenge will be a 48-hour row in August, ahead of a 5-day row in September. I'm sure each will pose new challenges, although I think it's safe to say I won't be beaching myself in a firing range again any time soon!

Best,
Victoria