

CURTIS BANKS + SEA CHANGE SPORT

March 2020

Introduction

I'm Victoria Evans, a 33-year-old sports lawyer. Originally from Yorkshire, I'm now based in London. You may have read the recent announcement that Curtis Banks has partnered my upcoming solo row across the Atlantic. As part of that partnership, we want to ensure that we bring you along on the journey. Via monthly updates, we'll share with you the background of how I came to be doing this challenge, the reasons behind it, how I'm preparing for such a big undertaking and why the support of Curtis Banks will be vital in helping me achieve my aims. In this first update, we want to introduce the challenge and look at the why I'm taking it on.

The 'Why'

Casting off from Gran Canaria in February 2021, I'll row 3000 miles west to Barbados in a bid to break the world record for fastest female to solo row the Trade Winds I route. The current record stands at 49 days 7 hours and 15 minutes. The campaign around the challenge is titled "Sea Change Sport." I'll undertake the crossing in an 8x2m purpose-built ocean rowing boat. Custom built from carbon and Nomex, it's the premium boat available for a challenge like this.

The question I most often get asked when I talk about this endeavour is "Why?". In short, I wanted a challenge of a great enough magnitude that it would offer a platform to leverage the conversation around gender inequality in sport. Most people find it difficult to comprehend what it will be like to solo row an ocean. That's perfect as it captures people's attention and, when I have that attention, I am able to discuss the issues and increase awareness. Often people have never stopped to consider the current social norms that create barriers for women's access to sport and the onwards impact that can have. I'm also aiming to raise £50,000 for UK charity Women in Sport.

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The next thing I usually get asked is why I am so passionate about this cause. In part that passion is a result of my working life. Like many women in the sports industry, I've encountered unacceptable discrimination in the workplace, but I've also learnt over time that if your voice is going to have impact it has to be telling a positive story. It must acknowledge the issues, but the key focus must be on change and progression.

Predominantly, however, my drive comes from my personal experience of sport. I didn't come to sport until my mid-20s and it was at a point in my life where I'd encountered a reasonable amount of adversity. The stress of that adversity manifested itself as a twelve-year-long eating disorder and depression. It's easy to think that living through adversity takes something away from you, and it does, but I firmly believe you should seek out the good in whatever hand you're dealt. What adversity gives you is the tools to fight, to persevere, to overcome. And those qualities serve you well in a sporting environment. As such, when I started to discover sport I realised I already had some of the necessary elements to participate. I might have been an out of shape, overworked twenty-something-year-old lawyer with a healthy penchant for white wine, but what life had ensured I'd got in my locker was resilience. It's that resilience that's drawn me to chase goals involving adventure and challenge.

Rowing the Atlantic will be the biggest adventure yet, an endurance challenge like no other. There will no doubt be days where I don't want to get up and row, but when the chips are down and you want to throw the towel in, life has taught me that your only option is to push on. In all circumstances you have the choice of how to react. I chose to use the events I experienced to fuel my desire to build a good life for myself. Sport has been the foundation of that life. It's defined my career and, once surrounded by sport for work, I brought it into my personal life. I started with running. I found it offered me the time to organise my thoughts and a reason to look after my body and properly fuel myself.

I progressed to participating in a half marathon. I'd never felt as accomplished as I did crossing my first finish line at 27 years old. I continued and ran another half marathon, then I took up road cycling. A couple of 100-mile rides later and I took on my first

triathlon, then a trail run. My ultimate highlights to date have been standing atop the summits of the Gran Paradiso, Mont Blanc and Kilimanjaro.

My experience isn't unique. Lots of people at various times in their life encounter adversity. In one form or another, everyone has their own ocean to cross. But it's sport that has shown me that the only limits are the ones we set ourselves. In overcoming sporting challenges, I have expanded my definition of who I am and what I'm capable of. I now want to help others do the same.

Delivering the Power of Sport to Others

Sport has the exponential power to drive change. Countless research studies have shown that participation in sport improves confidence, health and life expectancy and that engagement in sport gives individuals the tools to become better team players to succeed in education and professional life. Yet we see almost two thirds of women and girls failing to meet daily exercise guidelines, and men engaging in sport more than women across the board. So why is this the case? Campaigns often focus on encouraging women and girls to be active but we have to consider why they are not organically coming to sport. If we want to ensure long-term solutions then sport as an industry needs to be designed by, and marketed to, both men and women.

Every woman and girl should have the chance to benefit from the transformational power of sport. To achieve this, sport must be inclusive at all levels to ensure that when the opportunity is there, women and girls feel they belong in that space.

Acknowledging the status quo is not to be confused as a criticism of the current situation. We have to address the position we are starting from and look at what changes need to be made to ensure everyone has equally opportunities, regardless of gender. To achieve equal treatment, companies have to push boundaries and think differently to challenge the programmed ideas that women's sport isn't interesting and that women aren't as capable. We need to show people that, very simply, women and girls just need more opportunity. We need a culture change around how women in sport are viewed. We need encouragement. We need year-round media coverage to create understanding and role models, not just coverage during international events.

Equality in sport isn't a women's issue, it's a human issue. In his famous Harvard address, Bill Gates talked of how it's no longer sufficient to measure yourself on your professional accomplishments alone. You are valued on how you treat people. In pursuing the objective of equality in sport, investors need to be brave because it's been long established that if you're not willing to risk, you will have to settle for the ordinary. By stepping forward as my first partner for the row, Curtis Banks has proved itself to be anything but ordinary.