

CURTIS BANKS X SEA CHANGE SPORT

May 2020

BACK ON THE WATER

The last few months have, for all of us, been a particularly trying time. As an athlete preparing for an extended endurance challenge, there is no precedent for the tests to training that a global lockdown presents. COVID-19 brought uncertainty, interrupted training schedules and additional hurdles for sourcing financial support. With so much riding on the challenge, lockdown has been a particularly unsettling period. Add to this the loss of a family member at the end of March and you have a recipe for questioning how to move forward.

It is in these times that a strong purpose is mandatory. Since March I have remained confident that the campaign will survive these tests, that life will at some stage return to normal, and that I will be able to meet the intended departure date of February 2021. It was an absolute joy therefore to be able to launch my custom built R25 ocean rowing boat for the first time at the end of May. As restrictions lifted slightly, allowing unlimited time outside for exercise, and crucially permitting travel for exercise, I headed to Burnham-on-Crouch where the boat is kept to take the first of what will be millions of strokes of the oars. The benefit of being a solo rower is social distancing on the boat is rather straightforward – I'm the only one there!

Fear not, I have rowed an ocean rowing boat before. I am not stepping aboard for the first time a mere 9 months ahead of departure, but the boat build completion happened just before lockdown, meaning this was the first trip out in the vessel that will carry me 3,000 miles to Barbados. This was a huge milestone in a campaign that has so far been 2 years in the making.



You can see from the above image that she sat rather lopsided when first launched. Made from carbon and nomex, the boat weighs approximately 140kg without loose equipment on board (she'll weigh in the region of 500kg once fully loaded for the crossing). Her electrics and batteries have been fitted, but she is still awaiting the water maker (which desalinates sea water for drinking during the crossing) and the autohelm (the drive unit that moves the rudder by turning the tiller), which made her somewhat unbalanced. It took 55 litres of water to provide enough ballast to level her out ready for an outing.

As is traditional when launching a new boat, I christened her with a modest amount of champagne and officially named her Dina, after British sprinter Dina Asher-Smith. Let's hope she's just as quick.



After weeks alone in my apartment in London, it was a privilege to be back in the outdoors. I was rewarded for an early start with a beautiful sunrise and exceptionally still conditions which, whilst rather unrepresentative of what is to come, were a blessing for my first trip out alone on the Crouch. A little nervous at the prospect of facing backwards whilst navigating yachts, tides and winds, I'm pleased to report I'd remembered the seamanship and navigation skills I learnt during my ocean rowing exams in February and enjoyed an uneventful but exhilarating 6 hours of rowing.



The launch was not the only major milestone during lockdown. Keen to fully commit to the success of the challenge, I have taken the bold and somewhat terrifying decision to resign from my current Legal Counsel role. As an individual that has forged a career in law and always known precisely what my next professional move would be, it is somewhat of a daunting prospect to be voluntarily unemployed during a global recession. But with great risk comes great reward. My final day will be at the start of September, allowing me invaluable time on the water ahead of the start line to learn every inch of the boat, how all of the onboard systems work, and how the vessel reacts to different weather conditions. I'm currently exploring the option of taking the boat abroad to access the bigger conditions of the Atlantic, subject of course to border and travel restrictions.

But for now it's back to rowing on an indoor machine at home until the next time favourable weather conditions coincide with a weekend. With all the fantastic weather we've been lucky to enjoy during lockdown, it hopefully won't be long before I'm back on the water again.

Best,
Victoria