

Birmingham Beech Boys complete Atlantic row

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University of Birmingham Sport staff member Norman Beech, and his son James, have become the first British father and son team to row across the Atlantic after taking part in the Woodvale Atlantic Rowing Race 2009, in support of their chosen charity, WaterAid.

James, who celebrated his 19th birthday during the row, has also become the youngest man to row the Atlantic.

Norman, who manages the University's Raymond Priestley Centre, located on the shore of Coniston Water in the Lake District, and James, completed the ultimate test of mental strength and physical ability by rowing a gruelling 2,548 nautical miles, from La Gomera in the Canary Islands to Antigua in the West Indies.

After an exasperating month-long delay due to firstly the flares for the start of the race not arriving through customs then poor weather conditions, they finally started rowing 'Beech Boys Atlantic' – their boat, on January 4, 2010.

They crossed the finish line on Saturday 27 March 2010 after 83 days 4 hours and 29 minutes at sea, raising in excess of £50,000 which will go towards assisting the work of WaterAid in Tanzania.

The boys had a fairly slow and frustrating start to the race, with unfavourable winds pushing them back towards Africa and large waves to contend with which meant spending the first few days of the race drifting on para-anchor.

Once set into the schedule at sea, they had to contend with ways to stave off the inevitable monotony of their daily routines. This was helped by the many close-up wildlife sightings they have experienced including dolphins, flying fish, whales, many sea birds flying overhead and a couple of sharks, plus using packs of trivia and joke questions at meal times, calling home via satellite phone and writing a blog for the UBSport website.

Morale was occasionally low on board, especially having to eat the same type of boil in the bag meals every day, but saving up 'treat' foods such as jelly beans and jammie dodgers gave them a boost and they were helped immensely by daily motivational notes hidden in their food supplies.

Norman said, "Reading out all our messages of support each day was a massive boost; we read a Psalm each day which we found encouraging. We tried to set ourselves a daily rowing target, so that on your rowing shift you had something to aim for. The satellite phone enabled us to phone home twice a week and find out what was going on in the outside world."

He continued, "A friend had also packed a shoebox of small parcels for us and we opened one of these each week. We had a kazoo with us and at night time the person going off their shift blew a tune for the other person to 'name that tune!' We only used the iPod at night time and found this helped keep us awake as we listened to music and the full set of James Bond stories.

Having to spend much of their time fighting against adverse wind directions and forcible waves, they pushed on making steady progress over the following days and weeks.

However, they showed prominent advances over the last week of their row, with some obliging winds of up to 25 knots, helping them cover an average of 52 nautical miles per day, reaching 76 nautical miles per day at one point.

On arriving in Antigua, Norman spoke of their experience of finally rowing into English Harbour. He said, "We received an amazing reception, yacht horns blaring, yacht tenders escorted us in with people shouting 'well done', the whole of a quayside restaurant stood up to cheer us and then we saw our berth and the final welcoming crowd of which my wife Christine and daughter Lydia were a part of, there was an overwhelming feeling of happiness that we had succeeded. It felt very sweet."

He continued, "The race conditions were particularly difficult in this year's event – so having spent 20 days at sea longer than anticipated; it felt incredible to step ashore knowing that we had rowed 3000 miles ocean, with everything that it could throw at us."

Besides the personal adventure and challenge of rowing across the Atlantic Ocean, Norman and James wanted to support something significant and draw attention to the difficulties so many people in poorer countries have to access safe water, hygiene and sanitation.

Through WaterAid, the money raised from this row will go to change 2,000 people's lives through the provision of safe water and sanitation in their communities.

Director of Sport, Zena Wooldridge, said, "This lifetime achievement by Norman & James is not just about the 83 days rowing across the Atlantic Ocean, which is amazing in itself, but the last 2 years of meticulous planning, fund-raising and preparation, which is a Beech trademark! For the many followers of the Beech Boys' progress and daily blog over the last 12 weeks, I'm sure you share my immense pride in Norman and James' achievement."

She continued, "I'm looking forward to their next visit to campus when we can celebrate with champagne, jammie dodgers and jelly babies! Congratulations Beech Boys. Ride the clouds for as long as you can - so well deserved."

Notes to Editors:

To read about The Beech Boys adventure click here <http://www.sport.bham.ac.uk/transatlantic/> (<http://www.sport.bham.ac.uk/transatlantic/>)

The Raymond Priestley Centre is the University's outdoor pursuits centre, named after the Antarctic explorer. It is a well equipped, year round operation, delivering a variety of outdoor courses and expert tuition in activities as diverse as: mountain biking; canoeing; sailing; windsurfing; rock climbing; mountain walking; gorge walking; high and low ropes courses.

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