

DISPATCHES

News, Notes and Know-How From the Waterfront



Stop Dreaming. Set a Goal

AND BRING EXTRA POTATO CHIPS, SAYS THE 23-YEAR-OLD WHO JUST BROKE THE TALISKER WHISKY ATLANTIC CHALLENGE FEMALE SOLO SPEED RECORD

The worst day of Miriam Payne's 59-day, 16-hour, 36-minute solo row across the Atlantic was when she had to make peace with the fact that she was going to reach the finish on the Caribbean island of Antigua, but not in time for the record books.

About three weeks earlier, her shore support team had determined that if the 23-year-old could row her 24-foot boat an average of 55 nautical miles a day—ideally, 58—she'd become the fastest woman to row unassisted across the ocean in the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge. "It would be tough, but it was doable," she remembers thinking at the time.

Then, in a scenario countless boaters have faced in all kinds of vessels, increasingly bad weather forecasts started rolling in. With every update, there was a new obstacle. "It was becoming a northerly wind, and we thought, OK, it's only going to last couple of days, we'll just cope with it," she recalls. "At least it's not a headwind."

And then, it became a headwind.

"I think one day I rowed 18 hours and got less than 10 miles," Payne says. "Oh my gosh, I could just feel this record slipping away."

By the time the weather finally cooperated, setting the record would mean she had to row at a pace she had only

achieved once in the previous 2,500 miles since leaving Spain's Canary Islands. At that point, she didn't think it could be done.

"I was trying as hard as I possibly could, and I wanted it so badly, but there was literally nothing in my power that I could do to make myself go faster," she says. "You just have to wait for the weather gods to give you a bit of a break."

Finally, they did. Payne allowed herself just a few hours of sleep for nearly a week and managed to position herself so that if she rowed nonstop on the final day heading into Antigua in early February, she still might be able to break the race record. The safety officer for The Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge told her she still had a chance, albeit barely.

Top: Miriam Payne rowed from Spain's Canary Island to Antigua in under 60 days, breaking the female solo record.

“I hated him for it at the time, but he was right,” she recalls. “He said, ‘It might just come down to how much you want it.’”

She ended up beating The Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge solo female record by two hours and 38 minutes by rowing the last 22 hours straight through, with no more than two or three minutes of rest at a time to drink water or replenish the calories she was blazing through. Overall, she ate at least 5,000 calories a day, including freeze-dried rations, snack packs, breakfast bars, chocolate and potato chips—lots and lots of potato chips. She craved the “crisps” more than ever, she says, so much so that by the time she really needed the morale boost of opening another bag toward the end, they were all gone. “I definitely came to regret that,” she says.

But she has no regrets about taking on the challenge, which she’d been thinking about since someone mentioned rowing across the Atlantic when she was 14 or 15 years old. That inspiration led her to join the rowing team at the University of Glasgow, where she earned a degree in physics with a concentration in astrophysics while she was training, raising money and prepar-

ing for the Talisker trans-Atlantic race.

“Obviously, you need to be physically fit, but mental fitness is probably more important,” she says. “Also, just knowing the boat and knowing the equipment is really important.”

Surprisingly, she says, her best day out on the water was the first time she cleaned the hull. Growth had been building despite the antifouling, and it was hindering her pace. The necessary maintenance would require her to harness herself to the boat and dive overboard with a tool like a car’s wintertime ice scraper, all alone, in the middle of nowhere.

“There’s nobody to sort of look out for you if I hit my head or something, and nobody to pull me in,” she says. “I got into water, and I had to get out and have a breather, because it was quite overwhelming. It took me by surprise, really. And then, you know, after I’d done that, I was smiling for days because it was a huge adrenaline rush of getting in and swimming in the middle of the ocean so far from land.

“You feel pretty invincible,” she adds. “I think it took me by surprise how scared I would be that first time. But I just felt incredible after that, and I was smiling for days, it was so special.”

Her advice to anyone thinking about trying a trans-Atlantic cruise—in any kind of boat, including one with sails or engines—is to stop calling it a dream and, instead, set a goal. Make a plan with a buddy boat. Sign up for a regatta. Do something that is an affirmative step toward actually completing the crossing.

“I think there’s quite a big difference,” Payne says. “If somebody tells you it’s a dream, it seems like a thing that’s not really going to happen. But if you change that into a goal, then you’re like, okay, they’re serious. So just say yes, and sign up. You’re changing something from a dream to a goal. Just get the ball rolling in some way.”

Start with small steps, she says. Keep completing small step after small step.

“Those small steps eventually lead up to something big,” Payne says. “When I was out there, I realized so many more people are capable of doing this, if they could just realize it and realize their own potential in that way.”

Below: To break the record, Payne only slept a few hours for the last week of the crossing and rowed almost non-stop on the last day.



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