

No Step Too Small

Aged 21 I was rowing with Bedford Rowing Club while I worked as a research assistant for Unilever and took a year after my degree to apply for a PhD. We'd been to the National long distance trials in our singles that winter. The squad girls didn't have to go to the first trial because of its proximity to the World Championships but Guin Batten (top female single sculler at the time) had raced anyway for a bit of a run out. I came second to Guin which effectively meant I'd beaten every female sculler in the country who wasn't already in the squad. Everyone was quite surprised about that. I think I vaguely thought I'd be 'spotted' and someone might call me up and offer me some more coaching or something, but I went home and nothing happened. I sort of wondered what the trial had been for then, but just got back on with my training.

But it did make me think. I would be 22 years old that summer and so eligible for the Great Britain Under 23 team for the last time. I'd been rather cruelly denied the opportunity to compete at Junior (under 18) level because they had a rather strict entry qualification that stated that all prospective candidates should actually have started rowing by this age. I'd just beaten a lot of girls who you'd have thought would make up the team so it didn't seem entirely unrealistic that if I trained hard enough I could go too. If I thought about it at all I suppose I thought that if I could represent GB at U23 level that would be the summit of my rowing ambitions. I never really thought about where my rowing was taking me or where I could get to. I'd had a mantra that I'd been repeating since I left Liverpool that went "As long as I'm still getting better and still enjoying it then I'll keep going". I thought I could still get better (I didn't even try and think about how much) and I was still completely loving it so I was just looking for the next logical step.

Representing Great Britain in any capacity did seem a rather inaccessible dream but I just wanted to know I'd tried. "What would I feel like for the rest of my life if I didn't try?" - "What would it feel like to look back and never know if I could have done it or not?" It would be unbearable that's what. I couldn't even make myself go there in my head. I didn't so much care if I did it or not but I wanted to be able to look back for the rest of my life and know that I'd done everything I could; that I had reached the limits of my capabilities. I never want to be a "I could have been but..." person.

I didn't feel like a natural athlete (or an athlete at all) after being so poor at sport at school so felt I'd have to train harder than every one else. The Bedford women's squad trained four evenings a week and four more sessions

over the weekend (two each on Saturday and Sunday mornings) with our coach Gus, but I felt I could do more, would need to do more. A couple of mornings a week I'd get up early to go sculling or running before work, or if I didn't do that I'd cycle the ten miles to work and back, or if I didn't do any of that I'd get to training early in the evening and do an extra sculling session before everyone else arrived. On our day off on Friday I used to go to the club and row for sixty minutes as hard as I could on the ergo before going to my Friday night bar job. I tried to do at least one extra session a day.

I'd always be tired in the mornings and sometimes in the evenings I'd have to go home after work to pick up kit and I'd make the mistake of sitting down on the sofa and then I'd be so tired I didn't know how I'd even get off the sofa let alone do the session. And your brain can play tricks on you when you get tired like that. I think that sometimes we have physically capability left but we are just too mentally tired to access it and when you are sat on the sofa physical and mental tiredness feel the same. It is only experience that tells you that mental tiredness goes away when you exercise but I've not found any level of experience to tell me whether it is my brain or my body that has had enough while I'm still sat on the sofa. And that is dangerous because if you want to be the best you have to access all your capability. No one gets to compete at Elite level let alone win medals on anything less than 100%. And I already felt that my 100% was going to be less than everyone else's so I couldn't afford to miss a single fraction of a percentage, not a single session I was capable of completing.

Strangely it was never the mornings that were worst for me. They were bad but at least then I'd had some sleep and was in the habit of just getting up before I'd had the chance to think about it. It's after I'd got up early to train before work, then worked a full day that getting myself to do that evening session (when often there was no-one waiting to hold me accountable) was some sort of purgatory. I'd be sitting on my lab stool with my head on the bench, my kit ready in the car so I wouldn't have to go home and face the sofa. Or I'd sitting on the sofa at home because I'd cycled home and had to come back to pick up more kit. And the voice in my head would say "There is no way you can do this session, you are too tired today, it will do you more good to go to bed and get some extra sleep". And I'd have to fight the voice in my head so I'd tell it two things. The first one was:-

"What will I feel like if I race at the trials and lose out on a place by a couple of feet and then remember that I skived this session?"

And the second one was:-

"I don't think I can do this session but if I want to do all I can then I can do some of it. I can't do the session but I can get up, pick my kit up and get in the car"

So I'd pick my kit up and get in the car.

Then I'd think:-

"I'm too tired to do this session but I don't have to do the session. All I have to do is drive to the club and sit in the car park".

So, I'd drive to the club and sit in the car park.

And then I'd think:-

"I can't do this session but I can get my kit out of the boot and go and sit in the changing rooms"

So I'd get my kit out and climb the stairs and just sit in the changing rooms; sometimes for several minutes.

And then I'd say to myself:-

"While I'm here I might as well just put my kit on, then I can go home if I'm still too tired".

So, I'd do that. And often that would do the trick and I'd feel a new sense of purpose with my kit on and quit my moaning and go do the session. But sometimes I'd still be too tired. And I'd sit a bit more in the changing room with my kit on.

Then I'd think:-

"Well now I've come all this way and I've got my kit on I might as well just get my blades and boat out and put it on the water. If I'm still too tired when I've done that then I can go home".

So, I'd go down to the boat house and get my blades out and put them on the hard and go back and carry my boat out and put it on the water and put the blades in the gates and then I'd tell myself.

"Since it's all set up I might as well go out and row for 20 strokes. I'm not going to do a full outing just 20 strokes."

So I'd get in the boat and push off and do my warm up and row 20 stokes and then of course ninety-nine times out of a hundred I'd say, "Well now I've got this far I may as well finish" and found I was fine to continue. I think there were very few times in my rowing career when I've used that tactic and still felt so dreadful that after 20 stokes I turned round put my boat away and went home to sleep a totally guilt free, I know I've done everything I can, sleep.

That is how I tell the difference between physical and mental tiredness.

Of all the stories I tell it seems that this one, in its various guises (because I still use this strategy a lot around sport and work) resonates most with people. I've heard it quoted back to me by numerous people months or even years later. It does the rounds in organisations and comes back to me second hand sometimes. People who have heard it have gone out and managed to restart doing exercise after years, just a little at a time. And it's not just for exercise; it works for pretty much anything. The first time I told this story when I came back from Athens a woman came up to speak to me at the end of the session and said that she was in remission for cancer and I'd helped her because she realised that that was exactly how she needed to think about the next few days, weeks and months. How did I get to help a woman with cancer? My parents were doctors, they helped people with cancer, I thought I'd given up on that when I changed my career path. I was just a rower.

It's amazing the things you learn when you think you are learning something else.

Recently I heard my favourite rendition of this story quoted back. The woman delighted in telling me so I hope she won't mind me relaying it here.

The story goes that her four year old daughter loved to dance at home with her big, six year old sister. The six year old went to ballet classes but the little sister would not go. The mother had been on a workshop with me and heard my 'No step too small' story so when she went back she primed the dance teacher and put a pretty pink dress in her bag. As she got both daughters ready to take them to drop the older one off at her ballet class she let the younger daughter see the new dress and just said that she could put it on when they got there if she wanted. They drove to the sports centre where the class was held and the older daughter ran off to her class.

"Do you want to put this dress on?"

"I don't have to dance do I?"

"No, you can just put the dress on if you want to?"

“Ok”

“How about we watch your sister through the window for a while?”

“I don’t have to go in do I? I’m not dancing”

“No, you don’t have to dance, but we could just watch from here if you like”

“Ok”

“How about we go in and sit on those chairs and watch from a bit closer?”

“I’m not dancing”

“Yes I know that but we could just get a bit closer so we can see better”

“Ok”

So she sat happily swinging her legs to the music and the teacher came over and offered her a silver wand like the other girls were dancing with.

“I don’t want to dance”

“No, you don’t have to but you can still have a wand if you want”

“Ok”

So she sat swinging her legs and waving her wand to the music.

“If you want you could just get up and dance the rest of this one and then come and sit back down again”

“I don’t have to stay do I? I don’t want to dance except to this one”

“No, you can just dance to this one”

“Ok”

So, she got up and danced to that one and the next one and the next and that was it, she goes to all the classes and dances all the time. She totally loves it and her mother says it’s like ‘her thing’ now because being a little sister she never really had ‘a thing’ and having ‘her thing’ has given her so much more confidence and she can see it in all aspects of her life.

It seems to me that sometimes we make life so complicated. We set our aspirations so high or make projects so large and complicated we don’t know where to start and scare ourselves into immobility. When that happens I find its best just to begin and work out how to start later on. I stop worrying about how or where to get started and just do the most obvious next smallest step. **No goal is too big and scary that we can’t at least do the next small step before we give up on it and no step too small that we can’t feel good about having done it. It seems to me that as long as we keep moving forward these small steps can take us just about anywhere.**

So I worked pretty hard and I can’t quite remember how it all happened but my winter trials performances had been good enough to get me invited to the Under 23 selection trial in Nottingham. I loaded my boat onto the top of my car (Gus stayed behind in Bedford to coach the rest of the girls), drove up by myself and raced in my single and won. Everyone was quite surprised about that. I was a little annoyed at their surprise this time as I’d already done pretty well that year and no-one seemed to have remembered. Still, surprised

or not I got the place and my first GB colours and raced in the Under 23 Regatta in Greece that summer, it was awesome. I came 10th.

I didn't really know what was next but I was still enjoying it and still getting better so I thought I'd just keep going.