

Your Brain Stops You Before Your Body

Aged 22 I went to Cambridge University to study for a PhD in Molecular Microbiology (cloning genes of Bacteria). I knuckled down to start my PhD. I was a keeny beany student again. I set about it pretty much like my undergrad studies. I voluntarily went to some undergrad lectures in my first year on topics I thought might be useful but hadn't covered in my degree or needed a refresher. I read the relevant papers and I started following the recipes and methods in the text books and running the experiments.

And of course there was also the rowing. I trialled for the Women's Blue Boat in my first year and although competition was fierce, and there were times when I didn't think I would make the crew, I did get selected. We got up at 5am most mornings to row on The Cam and get back in time for the undergrads to make their morning lectures. In the evenings we did circuit training or 'Mad Mary Aerobics' both of which I loved. It didn't impede on my lab time too much, except that I had a bad habit of falling asleep at my desk in the afternoons (power naps – honest).

My rowing continued to progress which was good because it still definitely needed to. This was the first time I'd rowed every day and I found being able to pick up each outing with so little time in-between made a huge positive difference. My brain and my muscles could still remember from one session to the next what I'd done and what I was working on. I started to become a fan of doing something everyday if you want to get good.

They were a great bunch of girls, most of who had learnt to row over the course of just a couple of years at Cambridge. I really enjoyed the experience. We all took it quite ridiculously seriously in retrospect but it did feel like a really big thing to be involved in. The pressure to continue a seven year winning streak was huge. We raced the Women's Boat race in March at Henley (in my second term) and I got my first winning Blue. That felt pretty cool. Being on any Blues team at Cambridge elevates you to a certain status. We were invited to the right parties and made to feel rather special. It was kind of what I imagined being one of the cool sporty kids at school would have felt like – but with more gin.

I was walking around Women's Henley regatta one weekend in June when I heard a rumour going round that my Cambridge coach (and long time international coach) Ron Needs was recruiting and trialling girls to form an eight to compete at the Commonwealth Regatta in Canada that summer.

Rowing is not in the Commonwealth Games due to the relatively small number of Commonwealth countries that row but rowing organises its own separate regatta. The Great Britain senior team do not generally attend which leaves the door open as a great opportunity for potential 'B' team athletes like myself.

I'd not heard anything about it which I thought was a little odd as Ron had been my coach all year. I found him on the tow path and asked about it and received a bit of a confused response along the lines of..... "Hadn't thought you would be interested.....have to trial in a single as you haven't got a pairs partner and you've been rowing all year.....welcome to come along if you want but trials are next weekend.....not much time to prepare". I'm sure I'm not being paranoid when I say that what I really heard was...."Didn't even think of you, didn't think you were up to it". A little annoying considering I'd raced the single in the GB U23 team just a year ago.

Not to denigrate Ron in anyway for forgetting about me though. As well as playing a part in getting me get selected for the U23 single the previous year he has spent his life and career putting together scrap end boats with athletes that someone should be doing something with and no one is. He gets them together, trains them up and gives them their first taste of international competition when no-one else can really be bothered. He had already pulled together a women's four that year that was doing very well and was looking to find four more so his four could double up into an eight and maximise the development opportunity the Commonwealth Regatta offered to women like me (well obviously not quite like me – more to women bigger than me who actually looked like they could move a boat).

So, I went back to Cambridge with five days to prepare for the trial next Saturday. Fortunately I did at least have a boat now and it was sat on a rack in Caius boat house. Unfortunately, it was covered in dust having sat there pretty much since I'd arrived. I was fit enough but I'd been rowing all year in an eight. Going from an eight to a single is rather like walking off a nice flat topped wall onto a gymnastics beam. It all feels very insecure and twitchy. In fact I sometimes liken being able to sprint flat out in a single to being able to run flat out across a tightrope. It's an amazing thing to get such a feel for the instability below you that your responses are so automatic that the wafer of boat feels more like part of you than something to fall out of. Not that you ever stop falling out by the way.

I was game to give it a go but I was understandably a little nervous. Fortunately, as I was boating for my first outing Simon Haines from one of the Cambridge Town Rowing Clubs walked past and we got chatting "Don't

worry," he said "you won't have lost it. It'll still be there once you get back in. Don't train too hard this week, stay fresh and just do a few top end bursts to get back up there again". I pushed off and started sculling and I *was* fine. I'd not lost it. Within twenty minutes I was paddling like I'd never been out of this sliver of a little blue boat. I only had time to fit in another couple of short sessions that week around my lab work but did those few bursts and some practice starts and since that was all I had time for, that would have to be enough.

I can't help but think it would have made a difference if someone else had walked past and said "You're going to do *what*? You've got five days and you've not sculled for nearly a year? Wow! That's going to be really tough. You're going to need to be out here all the time grinding in that technique – it's so different from being in an eight". The work I'm in now we talk about S.N.I.O.P. (surrounded by the negative influence of other people) and its detrimental effects on performance. I'm sure it has an even stronger effect the other way and we should always take care to be S.P.I.O.P. as much as possible and help contribute to it however we can.

But I digress.

I loaded my boat onto my car very early that Saturday morning and drove to the East London Docks rowing venue. It's a very confusing place. I drove around for ages before finding it, at which point I was already running decidedly behind schedule. This was very unusual for me as I usually give myself loads of time to prepare before racing. As it was I screeched up, rigged my boat top speed, ran to the loo, picked up my boat and blades and boated just behind all the other girls. It was only as I was paddling up to the start and had time to run through my race plan in my head that I realised I wasn't actually sure how long the race was.

All international rowing races are 2Km long but I had a feeling I'd heard this venue was too short for that. How much too short was the question. We were now nearly at the start and I was far too embarrassed to ask "Um, excuse me, this race we're about to do, how long is it?" especially as no-one had thought I was good enough to even be here and I was sort of gate crashing. I didn't know much about sport's psychology at that point but I did think that not knowing the length of the race was the sort of psychological advantage one wasn't really supposed to give one's opponents.

Since I couldn't ask I had to decide and I decided it was 1500m long. Once I'd decided that was fine. The pair's trial went off first and those of us in singles

who didn't have pair's partners waited for the second race. I turned round and got onto the start. "ATTENTION..... GO!" and we were off.

I don't remember the first half of the race but I'm sure my standard pattern would have applied – dropped a bit off the start and then coming back. 750m was half way so I will have upped my rate at this point and started to push it on a bit more. Passing the 1000m mark with 500m to go I know I went into my patented last 500m wind for home (I *am* legendary for my big finishes). In a single there are just over 65 strokes left. So my race plan was 'lift the rate, 10 strokes and one for luck, (50 left) lift the rate, 10 strokes and one for luck (40 left), lift the rate, 10 strokes and one for luck (30 left), lift the rate, 10 strokes and one for luck (20 left), through the roof now, wind for 10 (10 left), last 10 up, up, up don't count just keep winding for the line'. Somewhere in this last 500m I drew level with and then overtook all the other girls and moved into first place. Up, Up, Up for the line and it was as I was heading into the last few strokes, just hanging on in there that I was aware something wasn't quite right. I took another couple of strokes and then another couple and no-one called "Down" (the call to stop rowing, short for "Wind Down"). I passed the 1500m marker (THE END?) and still no-one called "Down". A simultaneous realization and look over my left shoulder told me that this race was 1750m long and the finish line was at least another 25 strokes away.

And then a weird thing happened that changed not only how I see racing but how I see life (oh I am so deep). I had been hanging on for the 1500m finish; lungs and legs screaming; desperate for the end and not quite sure if I could make it. I was genuinely, completely and utterly, spent. Then I found out I had to keep going, and within one stroke.....I found I could. I dropped the rate a little and lengthened back out a bit but I held up pretty well, kept up my boat speed and kept my place in the lead.

I won and everyone was quite surprised about that.

And so I learnt that you always have more in you than you think you are capable of, that it's your brain that stops you before your body, that once you are ahead people tend to give up a little because they think you are cruising when actually you may be dying and finally that just because someone is ahead in that moment doesn't mean they haven't killed themselves to get there and you might still have more left.

If you hang in there long enough and hard enough you might just get lucky.

Five years after getting into a boat for the first time, rowing still had the power to surprise and delight me. It wasn't so much the rowing as the fact that rowing was the vehicle I'd found for testing the limits of my body and letting it surprise me. I was like my own on going science experiment to see what else my body might be capable of. If I'd been good at sport when I was growing up I'm not sure I would have felt like this. I think I might have taken my body more for granted and have been less excited and exhilarated by discovering the things I could make it do. I think that's maybe why I've never really heard other athletes describe the experience I'm trying to convey in quite the same way. I loved rowing for many reasons but this at least was a large part of its power. Every race was like an extension of that first ever race on the Manchester Ship canal. I sat on every start line scared half to death, facing the unknown, not even knowing what question I was asking until I crossed the finish line and had yet another answer. "Oh my God!!! My body will do THAT?!!" And my whole rowing career I never grew out of it. I never stopped being surprised, delighted and exhilarated - just like I never stopped scaring myself half to death. Scientifically speaking, from my empirical experiments, the strength of one is in direct proportion to the intensity of the other.