

## Momentum Gives You Balance

By the autumn of 1997 I was 26 and I entered into the busiest and craziest phase of my life to date. Towards the end of the fourth year of my PhD I'd decided that although research Science wasn't for me Science still was and I would be a teacher. They say teaching is a vocation and I'd always felt its pull and always thought I'd be quite good at it. I think if I ever thought of myself as anything it was as a teacher. I remember at school knowing I would be a Science teacher at some point in my life. I remember also wanting to be, amongst other things, a doctor, a vet, an engineer, a Blue Peter presenter and, after watching a television documentary about submarines, the first ever female naval submariner. The engineer and submarine thing were definitely about wanting to be seen as alternative and I'd have been dreadful at and hated both. Being a vet was based solely on watching James Herriot getting up to veterinary japes in the Yorkshire Dales on TV, as was picked up pretty quickly by the woman on the vet stand at the careers fair. The doctor thing seemed plausible enough for a while as both my parents were G.P.s but it was only when I thought of myself as and told people I was going to be a teacher that it actually meant anything. Not that I mentioned it much; it somehow didn't seem exotic or alternative enough.

Oh and finally, my friends think I am a Blue Peter presenter in all but the TV bit. Gail came to stay a few years back after she'd had a boy break-up. I said she could come and visit but I'd got a lot on so to bring some old clothes. We stripped and painted the front of the house, dug the garden and planted bulbs, cleaned out the goldfish, went for a long walk in the woods and made homemade bread, pumpkin soup and chocolate pudding and it was on the afternoon of the second day while we were sat making Christmas cards that she made my day by saying "It's like being on Blue Peter coming to your house". I think it was pretty good boy therapy too.

1997 had been an astonishing year for British Women's Rowing. The universal disappointment of pretty much the whole British Olympic Team at Atlanta 1996 (barring Steve and Matt obviously) signalled a change in British Sport. It was obvious that the days of the plucky amateur were over. As a nation if we wanted our athletes to fund themselves and hold down jobs we could not also expect them to bring home medals. If we wanted to be able to watch the Olympics with pride and see the Union Jack go up that flag pole we were going to have to pay for coaches and equipment and training camps and give the athletes a grant to live off so they could train full time and still afford to eat. As if by magic the National Lottery started up that year and Bingo! (or Lotto or what ever you call) there was a source of money to do it.

One year on and it seemed to be working. Miriam Batten already 'veteran' of two Olympics was in the double with Gillian Lindsey. Miriam and Gillian had raced well all season but not medalled and then in the Aiguebelette World Championship final they took Silver just over a second behind the legendary Germans. What struck me most about that race and still does whenever I see it, is the fact that coming into the finish the GB double were in bronze medal place with the top three boats well clear of the field. After not medalling all season and with British women not medalling at all for years even a bronze would have been a celebrated result and lesser women would surely have taken it. Not Miriam and Gillian, they kept pushing and overtook the Romanians to take Silver by just 0.13 seconds.

Then on the Sunday, a totally new eight containing no returning Olympians, came through to take third place and a Bronze medal. What's more, half of this eight (Alex Beaver, Lisa Eyre, Libby Henshilwood and Sue Walker) had already won a Gold in the four the day before. The four is not an Olympic class boat and therefore not as competitive an event which is perhaps why I mentioned it after the eight and with slightly less fanfare, but still....Britain now had four female WORLD CHAMPION rowers. This was a big deal. The whole 1997 World Championships was a very big deal for British Women's rowing.

I'd rowed with Alex and Sue in the Commonwealth eight. Francesca Zino, (also from the eight) had been in Blondie my second Blue Boat year. And so for the first time I was able to look across at friends with medals around their necks and think "I used to do that, I used to train with them and race against them and sometimes in my single I know I used to beat them" and you know what it's like when you look at your mates doing something you used to do..... I just thought "Wouldn't it be a shame if I was capable of doing that and I never found out....."

And I was already 26 so I thought it was probably about time to finally find out. It wouldn't wait much longer. I decided I'd give it one last big shot (Ok really my first big shot), give it my all this year and just see what happened. Being me it never even occurred to me that that should be all I was doing but I did take it into consideration. Thames Rowing Club was the place to be for female rowers at that time and so I applied to Roehampton Institute so I could move down to London to restart my rowing. When I got there I found that Roehampton Institute is actually an historic and much respected teacher training collage but that was really a co-incidence. When I went for my interview the last question they asked was.....

“So Alison, we have to ask this for marketing purposes. Why did you apply to Roehampton in particular?”

“Well, I want to row out of Thames Rowing club at Putney and you’re the closest.” If I’d learnt anything from my PhD it was that it was best to be clear up front.

And the guy permitted himself a little smile and then straight faced turned to his colleague, “I don’t believe we are using that in our marketing material, perhaps we ought to make a note.”

They took me anyway. My PhD was useful for something.

So I started my teacher training (PGCE) and re-started my rowing training. It was September; the final selection trials for the GB team would be in April. I had seven months. My first 2K ergo test told me how much ground I had to make up. The cut off for even attending the trials was 7.10, a score I’d been just about capable of while at my peak in Cambridge. Even that is not a great score, it was generally accepted that you needed to be at least sub 7 to have any chance and you’d be laughed off the ergo if you submitted a score like 7.10 these days but back then it just about did. In my ergo test the first week I think I just about managed to scrape under a painful 7.30.

I knew that the squad girls training full time as a group up in Marlow under Mike Spraklen were training two or three times a day, about 16 sessions a week. With my teaching course it was going to be hard to match that but I had to get as close as I could. I’d get up at 5am 2-3 mornings a week to go sculling, then after college I’d always go straight to the rowing club for the evening training session with the Thames girls. Sometimes we’d go out in singles or crew boats but more often during the winter when it was dark, wet and cold the training programme saved the rowing for the weekend and had land training on ergos or in the weights room during the week. This wasn’t enough for me. My Cambridge rowing had taught me how important it was to go out on the water every day. I felt that being able to take the lessons from one day into the next while they were still fresh in my mind and muscle memory was how I moved on fastest, and I needed to move on fast. There didn’t seem much point getting fitter if I couldn’t translate it into boat speed and by training in my boat I could do both at the same time. I made a pact with myself that my priority was to get out on the water every day, no matter what.

Being at Collage so close usually enabled me to get down to the club before the other girls made it back from their full time jobs in and around London so if I hadn’t been out in the morning I’d fit in an extra sculling session before they all came down; we’d then do the land training session together. That

way I kept everyone happy and with the four big rowing sessions at the weekend (two on Saturday morning and two on Sunday) I was managing around 12 sessions a week around my collage schedule, it was a good start.

On a good day rowing on The Tideway is a joy; a long, wide, glass like sweep of water on which to ply your trade for mile after uninterrupted mile. How many of those days do you think we get in a British winter? I mean obviously it rains a fair bit but rain never stops you rowing (What are you - made of sugar?), unless it's accompanied by lightening in which case it's usually a good plan to get in as quickly as possible - water and electricity never being a particularly good combination.

Wind however is a different story. The Tideway is like a little bit of trapped sea and on a windy day it can feel nearly as ferocious. The open expanse of water means that there is no where to hide from the wind and the waves just roll into each other and build in size. When the wind blows it can get really choppy, when wind blows against stream/tide the water boils and you get waves and white caps. These are the days when it's really, really tempting to think that you'd be better off on the ergo. But I'd made a pact with myself that my priority was to get out on the water every day no matter what - even and especially on those days. As you might expect it became something of a personal challenge. Ok, on some days it really was impossible but I soon learnt that it was far less often than one might at first have thought.

I used the same technique as I had in Bedford. I refused to make an outright judgement on whether it was possible from looking out of the boat club door and just took it step by step. If I could carry my boat down the slip to the water then that was a start. Occasionally it was too windy to even do this safely, but sometimes as I got more skilful I would ask for help with carrying the boat as I still thought it might be possible when I got out there. Then if I could actually hold the boat down onto the water long enough to get in it that was the next step. Then it was just a case of building up the slide from a relatively stable 'backstops' position (arms and body only) to see if I could get to full slide sculling. Even if I could only stay out for 10-15 minutes and didn't get beyond  $\frac{1}{4}$  slide before it really got too dangerous and I got too scared (or on a couple of occasions, fell in) it still felt like it was worth it. I'd kept my pact, the next time it was rough like that it would be easier technically and mentally and how easy would it feel now when the water was like glass? I soon learnt several important points that helped me to scull/row in rough water. I don't know if they will help anyone else but this is what I do.

1. I remember to enjoy it and keep my sense of humour. If I can feel it's a crazy adventure rather than scary trial that definitely helps. If I feel myself start to tense up and resent it I remind myself to smile and the process of smiling seems to trick my body and my boat into thinking that I'm enjoying myself and they behave themselves better.

2. I stay relaxed. Reference to point 1 helps here.

3. I think of myself floating over the top of the water/waves rather than ploughing through the middle. This is why, contrary to what you might expect, I reckon it's actually easier to row a single in rough conditions than a larger heavier crew boat.

4. I accept that a fair proportion of the strokes are going to be rubbish because I'm doing something very hard. If I row a rubbish stroke I accept it and forget about it and just think about how I can make the next one good. This is particularly important when racing. Then, for every rubbish stroke I do, I remember that my opposition will be finding it just as tough and rowing at least as many rubbish strokes. The less time I can spend worrying about the rubbish stroke I've just done the more time I've got to think about how to make the next stroke not rubbish.

5. Crucially, what I learnt was that no matter what happens, no matter how much or how little water I pick up on the end of each blade, no matter if I get one or even both of my sculls stuck in the water, knocked by a wave or blown by the wind; **I never stop, not for a second, not for a fraction of a second. No matter what the wind and water does to me above the waist I can and do keep my legs pushing down in the same rhythm. I think of my legs as a metronome. My upper body is relaxed and goes with the flow and rolls with the punches but my legs are fighting, battling to keep me pushing over that water. I control what I can control and don't worry about the rest.** Makes sense really. If you think about walking that tightrope, what are you going to do if you wobble or the wind blows? If you stop you know you're going to fall off so you run to the other side. Like riding a bike, momentum gives you balance - and it's the same with rowing. **Momentum gives you balance so the important thing in rough water is always to keep moving.**

I learnt much about life from working out how to move a boat through rough water. I am very deep.

I made selection for the National Squad that year by the way. But maybe more of that later.

