



ST. MARY'S MATTERS

EDITION 15
SUMMER 2022

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Oarsome!

Alison
takes on the
Atlantic



Atlantic adventure

It's been described as the world's toughest rowing challenge – so what on earth has it got to do with 60-year-old working mother of two from St Mary? Quite a lot, actually. Alison Smithurst is a member of an all-women team planning to become the oldest female fours crew ever to row across the Atlantic. They're taking part in the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge – a 3,000 mile race constituting one of the most brutal physical and mental trials available to extreme sports enthusiasts anywhere.



And then there's the mental challenge. What lies ahead of them is described by a competitor who took part in the race in 2020. "I think the overwhelming thing was just the relentlessness. We knew it would be about 35 to 40 days, but I don't think we really understood just how long that actually is, to be doing the same thing all the time. It was literally, get up, row, eat, do some odd jobs, try and sleep, repeat. That was it, for 37 days – looking at nothing but the ocean, seeing no-one but each other. It's a very long time."

The Atlantic Challenge is the top event in ocean rowing, more than 3,000 miles from La Gomera to Nelson's Dockyard in Antigua. The fastest row in the race history was by a four-man team who completed the course in 29 days, 14 hours and 34 minutes. However, it took a solo rower in the 2016 race 96 days, but that was after losing his rudder. Record times aren't however the driving force for the Jersey girls – it's all about breaking age barriers.

"We've all got kids," said Alison. We wanted to be able to demonstrate to them that if you set your minds to it, you can do anything. We're not extreme athletes. We have all got aches and pains. To be honest we don't really know what lies ahead of us. We don't underestimate what we're up against but there's no way we can know exactly what we are going to put ourselves through. There may be capsize. We've been told about boats suffering

On December 12th next year the four Jersey girls - Alison, Julie Brady, Rosemary Satchwell and Helene Monpetit - will climb into a rowing boat in La Gomera in the Canary Islands and set off on an epic non-stop row across the Atlantic. They expect it to last anything from 30-60 days, but if things

don't go their way, it could be considerably longer. They will battle tough sea conditions with waves up to 40 feet high, in potentially stormy weather, as well as sleep deprivation, salt sores and blisters, not to mention debilitating sea-sickness.

ABOVE: Alison Smithurst





marlin strikes (a kind of swordfish that can be up to 16 feet long and weigh nearly 2,000 lbs). My one fear is sea-sickness."

The Jersey quartet will be on board a 30 feet long boat with two team members on rowing duty at any time and the other two eating and sleeping. They'll be working a consistent pattern of two-hour shifts. Working in pairs they will spend two hours rowing then two hours off for the whole duration of the trip. That time off includes doing all the chores; checking in with the race organisers; looking after their hygiene; eating – and, if they're lucky, trying to snatch some sleep in the remaining 90 minutes.

The rules of the race mean that the team will be unsupported. They need to take everything with them including everything they eat – and they'll eat lots, around 5000 calories a day. All their food will be freeze-dried. They can't cook, they can only boil the water which they will desalinate onboard thanks to solar power. Washing is done with wet wipes. Polluting the ocean is banned - all rubbish including those wet wipes has to be stored on board.

Three of the of the team are experienced rowers. Alison Smithurst had been doing coastal rowing since her mid-20s. "When you live on an island it's just a natural thing to do. I had a couple of friends who did coastal rowing and they introduced me to the sport." But the fourth member of the team, Julie Brady is a comparative newcomer.

She has however quite a

pedigree in other sports and has been training hard with her crew mates ever since the decision to take on the challenge.

The team will be rowing a brand-new boat, which is an updated version of the craft that has taken more rowing teams across oceans than any other. "It's very cleverly designed," said Alison, "it's both lighter and more environmentally acceptable than previous versions. We hope to have it in Jersey by August. When we do, the most important thing is to spend as much time as possible in the boat. The organisers insist we do a required number of onboard hours. We also have to do a continuous 130-140 hour training row."

The idea to take on the challenge had been gestating over quite a long period of time. It came to a head during the first Covid lockdown. "Our kids were getting older, we wanted to have something to look forward to. We wanted a challenge and we decided to go for it," said Alison. Signing up for the race was one thing. They decided to have their own boat built – at a cost of £80,000. They managed to put down enough money for a deposit but their mission between now and the race is to find sponsors who can come up with some serious money to back them.

"We're going to do it come hell or high water, but we do need the right sponsors," said Alison. Apart from the cost of the boat, the race entry fee alone has cost £23,500. Boat equipment will

set them back another £12,000. All in all, they're looking at a total cost of more than £160,000. While they're signed up to strength and conditioning programmes and building up their core strength they're working just as hard on the financial side of the equation.

Even some of the little things haven't been easy, like what to call their boat. They eventually decided on Intrepid 232 – the numbers referring to their combined age on the day the race starts. They're determined to set a new world record for being the oldest female crew ever to row across the Atlantic. And they're not only doing it for themselves. Two charities will benefit, the Grace Crocker Family Support Foundation which looks after families with sick children receiving medical support in the UK, and the Blue Marine Foundation, an environmental group dedicated to restoring the oceans to health by tackling overfishing.

Despite all the ongoing doubts and fears and the hard work ahead, not to mention the ordeal at sea, however long it takes, Alison is excited about what the future holds. "I think it will be a really exciting and uplifting thing to do," she said. "I'm so looking forward to what we will see out there - the clear skies, stunning sunrises and sunsets, pods of dolphins, whales and flying fish. It'll be awesome. It's remarkable the lengths you will go to, to avoid having to cook the family dinner!"



BELOW: An earlier version of the boat Alison and her crew will be using