

The Crossing:

Conquering the Atlantic in the World's
Toughest Rowing Race

James Cracknell & Ben Fogle

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Extract

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Prologue

BEN

'Can I have a picture with you?' giggled Martine McCutcheon as she handed her camera to a friend, and flung her arm around James Cracknell's broad shoulders.

'You're amazing,' she added, admiring the gold medals around his neck before disappearing into the crowded room.

I lined up behind Chris Tarrant and Melinda Messenger to congratulate Britain's recent Olympic hero. It was late summer 2004 and I was at a celebrity bash at London Weekend Television. The room was brimming over with reality TV contestants and soap stars falling out of tiny dresses. It was an incongruous place to find an Olympic rower, I thought.

More photos and autographs and then it was my turn.

JAMES

The event was the highly inclusive and not at all prestigious National Celebrity Awards, held a month after the Olympics had ended – a time in an athlete's year when any free champagne is gratefully received. Matthew Pinsent and I were presenting an award to Kelly Holmes for being the 'Sporting Celebrity of the Year' and now I was at the after-show party, where everyone was staring round the room trying to find the most famous person in the room to talk to – or in my case, trying to work out who anybody was. *Big Brother* had passed me by while I was out of the country preparing for the Olympics and besides, the soaps are on at the same time as my wife Bev and I are trying to slam-dunk our beautiful boy

Croyde into bed. I hardly recognized anyone – the A-list stars must have missed the RSVP date.

One programme I had seen was *The Million Dollar Property Experiment*, presented by two guys called Colin and Justin. I was telling them how Bev and I enjoyed the show, but the conversation petered out when they asked me what I did and sport didn't really hit their spot. Luckily, somebody else wandered up and saved us all from an embarrassing silence. It was Ben Fogle – the king of BBC daytime. We had met each other once before at a charity dinner, and he was his usual polite and enthusiastic self. We engaged in a bit of nondescript chit-chat, but that was blown out of the water when he said, 'I'm rowing across the Atlantic next year. Do you want to do it with me?'

BEN

As James stared at me, a small furrow appeared on his brow.

'No,' he replied bluntly.

Wow, he doesn't mince his words, I thought as I scurried off in search of another drink.

JAMES

Having just come off the back of four years' preparation for the Olympics, I had spent a month undoing all the good work I'd done to my body, and the idea of rowing 3,000 miles was the last thing on my mind. I also sensed my wife Bev flinch as Ben asked the question.

If I wanted to be considered for the British team at the 2005 World Championships, I would have to report for training on 1 October. This was two weeks away; mentally I was not in a position to make up my mind about whether I wanted to race at Beijing in 2008, but I was sure that I did not want to begin training so soon. I met with Jürgen Grobler, the British Chief Coach, and told him that I'd like to take a year away from the sport to do other things and come back totally refreshed, mentally and physically.

For me, rowing is the ultimate team sport. In a game of football, rugby or cricket, you can still win even if a member of your team has a shocking

day. If that happens in rowing, you will lose. In a four-man boat, everybody has to do their 25 per cent or you're going down, meaning that for every moment of a race, your dreams are in other people's hands, and their dreams are in your hands. As I wasn't sure what my dreams were now that the Olympics were over, I knew that I couldn't be trusted with other people's. If I'm honest I hadn't enjoyed much of the rowing over the previous four years; despite being successful I always felt (probably unfairly) I had to motivate Matthew Pinsent and it had drained me of enthusiasm. I did not want anybody to feel that I was a burden and the one that had to be motivated.

So there it was, I now had a 'year off'. What was I going to do? Being a successful British Olympian is a magical thing and is mirrored by the opportunities that come your way. I had the chance to do more writing for the *Daily Telegraph* and TV work, and to speak in public about our preparation for Athens to businesses and schools.

Great as that diversity of activities was, however, there wasn't anything on the horizon to get my competitive teeth into. All I knew was that I wanted to stay in shape, so that I would be in a position to rejoin the national squad and fight for a place at the 2008 Olympics if that dream reignited within me. So I entered marathons and triathlons, and agreed to paddle across the Channel on a surfboard for charity. That should have been enough, but there was still a nagging question at the back of my mind: 'Do you want to row across the Atlantic with me?'

Being a rower, I was well aware of the Atlantic Rowing Race. Our sport is not that big, and anything with oars is happily included. If I'm honest, my perception of the race was tainted by arrogance on my part, as the winner of the inaugural 1997 race was a world silver-medallist New Zealand oarsman, partnered by a sailor and surf-lifeboat rower. Other British guys and girls that had crossed weren't even in the national team – how hard could it be?

I have always loved the movement of rowing; the way the boat cuts through the water propelled by manpower alone and the freedom that being out on the water gives me. I was beginning to miss that feeling already, but I still wasn't ready to commit to the regime of training three

times a day, seven days a week for six weeks, followed by a day off spent travelling to or from a training camp or race. There was, however, a big space in my year off for some sort of competition at the end of 2005, just before I would be forced to make a decision on whether I would don the British Lycra full time again.

I spoke to some of my rowing colleagues about whether they fancied a row across the pond; I didn't receive any enthusiastic responses. I knew that if I entered the race, even though it is billed primarily as an adventure, I would want to win. Would doing it with Ben give me the best chance of winning it? No. On the other hand, there was part of me that thought I might enjoy not being the favourite for once. Having spent much of the last ten years being in the boat that most people in the world wanted to beat, the chance to be an underdog with no pressure was appealing.

I got in contact with Ben.

BEN

I had been thinking about rowing the Atlantic for some time, having heard about the Woodvale Atlantic Race in 2001 when Debra Veal hit the headlines. Hers was an inspirational story: when her husband dropped out of the race after only a few days, she decided to continue on her own and, against all the odds, succeeded in crossing 3,000 miles of ocean by herself. I had been bowled over not only by the fact that it was possible to row across an ocean at all, but that there was even an organized race in which to do so. I was intrigued and, more importantly, tempted. At this stage I should point out that I've never really rowed. I tried it once at school on the River Stour, but was hopelessly uncoordinated and lacking in balance, so naturally I wouldn't have any problems rowing across the Atlantic. Clearly, if I was to do it, I needed someone who knew what they were doing.

I had been hatching this plan for months, therefore, when I turned up at the ITV summer party, but it's fair to say it was somewhat hazy. I was determined that I would take part in the race but I'd given almost no thought to who I would persuade to accompany me. I had considered

placing a 'small ad' asking for a 'fellow rower' and running auditions for those who responded. It would have been a sort of 'Rowing Idol' but I didn't feel that I was equipped to judge the winner. As far as more experienced rowers were concerned I knew next to nothing about the 'oarsome foursome'. Like the rest of the UK, I was aware of the prowess of Messrs Redgrave, Foster, Pinsent and Cracknell, but I had no idea which of them I'd most like to spend six weeks alone at sea with.

The first part of my evening at the awards was taken up with committing myself wholeheartedly to the drinks that were being liberally distributed and I'm fairly certain that the alcohol on offer contributed to my later decision to approach James. At the time it had seemed like too good an opportunity to miss: I was sorely in need of a renowned oarsman and there one was, sandwiched between two celebrity decorators, ripe for the picking. Looking back I realize it was a definitively serendipitous moment. If I hadn't approached James then, I'm not sure that I ever would have had the courage to do so. I certainly haven't done anything like it before or since. And my choice was particularly incongruous. Matthew Pinsent was about to announce his retirement and would be looking for new projects to take on. He would have been an obvious candidate. For all I knew James was still an Olympian first and foremost – his gaze unflinchingly focused on Beijing – and my suggestion could well have stuck in his memory purely for its strangeness, like an after-dinner anecdote: 'You'll never guess what Ben Fogle, you know, the TV presenter with the Labrador, asked me to do...' I had no idea that he had, in fact, absorbed my invitation and was considering it as I left him to continue making inroads into ITV's alcohol budget for 2004.

JAMES

After I had persuaded Ben's agent that I was not a stalker, she agreed to forward an email to him. Having thought it over for quite some time, I told her that I was interested in doing the race and asked if I could meet up with Ben to have a chat about it.

Ben is one of the most positive people I've ever met – a quality which was not lost on me when trying to judge my potential rowing partner's

likelihood of turning into a suicidal (or worse, homicidal) maniac in the middle of the Atlantic. If he was either of those things, then he was hiding it very well. Don't be fooled by the posh accent, slightly bumbling manner (think Hugh Grant in, well, in any film) and comfortable upbringing at public school: Ben is incredibly competitive and driven by a fierce desire to succeed. Just look at what he's achieved since coming off the *Castaway* island; sure, he gained the initial benefit of being on Britain's first reality show, but he'd done well to make himself a long-term career from it.

I never saw him on the show, as I was in and out of the country preparing for the Sydney Games; he didn't see any of the Sydney Olympics, as he was stuck on an island. That pretty much sums up how much we knew about each other when we agreed to enter the race together.

Ben was going to take part in the race anyway and had somehow scraped together the considerable entry fee and the deposit for a boat – a fact that made the race a very real possibility, rather than an idle conversation. We spoke about the financial cost of the race. Once the race fee, boat, equipment, food and communications had been paid for, it was going to cost about £70,000 – a huge amount of money to find in such a short time. We stood a better chance of getting sponsorship than most, but it would still take work to secure it and we were leaving it very, very late.

On top of the expense of doing the race, of course, I also had to take into account the loss of earnings that would result from being away from home for such a long time. Of all the ways to earn money as a retired professional sportsman, corporate speaking is one of the most profitable. Most companies have their conferences in a key financial quarter and it would be foolish of me to be away from home then. I enjoy the speaking and it is flattering that people are interested and seem to enjoy the inside track on how we prepared for the Olympics. But I find it hard talking about something I've done without having another major goal. The question I least look forward to is 'What are you doing now?' as nothing seems as worthwhile as the answer 'I'm in training for the next Olympics.'

Participating in the race would mean I wouldn't be talking about past achievements. I'd actually be doing something again: rowing across the Atlantic. I knew that, mentally, it would be a good thing for me to aim for, allowing me to make the most of my year away from the sport.

More importantly still, I had family responsibilities, both financially and as a husband and father. We'd just bought a new house that needed a lot of work, and despite her own professional commitments and despite being in the middle of writing a book, Bev had taken on the vast majority of the childcare while I was training for the Olympics. Was it unbelievably selfish of me to go away for six or seven weeks? I tried to console myself that I'd been away a lot more when I was rowing, often for six months of the year; at the end of the day, six weeks wasn't that big a deal... except that I'd be away over Christmas.

I left the meeting telling Ben that I was interested, but that I couldn't justify doing it if we didn't get sponsorship for the race. I had my family commitments, while Ben only had to look after his dog, Inca the Labrador, the 'one luxury item' he was allowed to take with him on *Castaway*. I made sure he knew that it was one luxury item that wouldn't be allowed on the boat.

BEN

About a month after the party, a 'You have mail' message appeared on my desktop. It was from James Cracknell. He explained that he had been thinking about my question, and that in retrospect he would like to retract his 'no' and meet to discuss the idea further. I was thrilled.

We organized to meet at the Hogarth sports club in Chiswick, near James's home. I was nervous about seeing him, and I remember thinking that he looked a lot larger than I had remembered him being at the party, but my faculties were slightly impaired that evening so I dismissed the recollection. James was straight to the point: he explained that he had a son and a wife to support and that he couldn't just leave them for a jolly, but that he was taking a sabbatical from rowing and was essentially free during the race dates, from late November 2005 to January 2006. In short, he was now very much interested.

The problem was that James had recently announced that he was taking a year out from rowing, and he didn't want to confuse issues by revealing his intention to row across the Atlantic, so we agreed to keep it quiet. This conversation left me with rather mixed feelings. I was genuinely excited, not only that James had agreed to be my rowing partner, but that the project was finally off the ground. I was flattered, too, that James had agreed to row with me, a novice. But the fact that we couldn't announce James's decision put me in a difficult position. I had already begun conversations with sponsors and knew that, quite reasonably, they were reluctant to commit without knowing who the second rower was to be. Sponsoring James Cracknell and Ben Fogle was one thing; discovering that you have actually sponsored Ben Fogle and Jimmy Savile would have been quite another. If I was to secure the money we needed I had to be able to tell people exactly who they were giving their cash to. We decided to put the project on hold for a couple of months while I fulfilled filming commitments out in Namibia. We still had over a year to plan the expedition and we planned to meet again the following year.

In January 2005, Woodvale Events, the organization that runs the Atlantic Rowing Race, were showing at the *Daily Telegraph* Travel and Adventure show at Olympia. They would have a boat with them as well as an assortment of ex-ocean rowers, and it seemed the perfect opportunity to publicly announce our participation in the event, but James still felt it was too early. We agreed a compromise and decided that I would announce my intention to row the Atlantic. That way, we could formally start looking for sponsors and if that failed, we still had our secret weapon: James.

A photocall was held. Several dozen photographers came down to the show, but the call failed to generate much press interest. Then, about a week later, I was at a party in London and a diarist from the *Daily Mail* asked me about the race. The penny dropped when I revealed to her that all past competitors had rowed it naked.

'Naked?' she said, in a splutter of champagne.

'I believe so,' I shrugged.

The next day, the paper ran a large story about my intention to row the Atlantic NAKED, and this seemed to capture the public imagination. I was baffled, but the press loved the idea. It seemed crazy that my intention to row 3,000 miles across the Atlantic was of less interest than the prospect of my nakedness, particularly given that the only person who would be able to appreciate my fine physique would be James, but then we British have always had a sniggering, *Carry On* fascination with bottoms and bareness and I was happy to play along with it if it was going to help us pay for the boat.

I was filming for *Countryfile* in the Shetlands at that point and was beginning to have considerable anxieties about how our endeavour was going to pan out. So far all I had from James was a gentleman's agreement – he could, quite reasonably, withdraw at any point. I, however, was already in hock for signing up to the race. There was absolutely no going back for me and if James was unable to take part in the race I had very little time to find another rower. It was crunch time. I rang James to discuss our predicament and was slightly floored that he was incandescent with rage at *me*.

'Why did you tell the BBC about the race without discussing the pitch with me first?' he demanded. He explained that the commissioning editor had asked him about the rowing and told him that the BBC were unlikely to want the documentary. 'You've jeopardized the whole project. If we're going to film it we've got to go about it properly and not put in half-arsed proposals,' said James.

It wasn't a great start to our relationship; we still didn't know each other and already we were stepping on toes. I was astonished by his reaction; he knew I was trying to find a broadcaster for the project as it had been one of his terms for coming on board. I was disappointed, and began to doubt his intentions.

'James, I don't think this is going to work,' I sighed down the phone while sheltering from a bitter Shetland wind, 'I have to get this project under way.' I'd already invested more than £10,000 in race fees and we didn't have a boat or, more to the point, a sponsor. James was still reluctant to announce his involvement, and we were running out of time.

‘Mate, I want to do it, we just need to work as a team on this,’ he countered. He had a point; if we couldn’t communicate at this stage, then it was unlikely we would fare better out in the middle of the Atlantic. We talked through our differences and I explained my financial concerns. James agreed to split the costs we’d met to date. It was a very tangible step in what had up until that stage been a purely theoretical partnership and, for me, it was the moment I felt that we were truly in this together. We arranged to meet up again in London, and put together a strategy that would in principle work for both of us. We had also had our first disagreement, and something told me it wouldn’t be the last.

JAMES

It should have been about this time that I expressed to Bev how seriously I was planning to race if we got the sponsorship, rather than saying, ‘There’s no point in discussing it too much until I know for sure that I’m doing it.’

If I could go back in time there are many aspects of our preparation I would change, and discussing the race in more detail – and earlier – with Bev would be one of them. I should have explained to her all the safety procedures we have to go through, and I should have said that the fact that I wanted to go away for six weeks didn’t mean I loved her any less.

In the event, Ben and I dithered and didn’t make much use of the first half of the year to plan, which left us in a huge rush to get ready, operating on the Japanese industrial model of Just In Time Management. I learnt a hell of a lot while planning this adventure, but one of the biggest lessons was to be thankful for the easy life of a full-time athlete. Make no mistake, my preparation for the Olympics was tough, my whole life revolving around getting myself in the best possible shape, mentally and physically, for 21 August 2004; but looking back it was pretty easy. Yes, I was training all day nearly every day, but the training programme was set, there were doctors, physios, dieticians, physiologists and sport psychologists working with us, the boats were bought and taken wherever in the world we needed them, and I was sponsored and supported by the National

Lottery. For this race, we had to do everything, from getting the boat built and paid for, to sorting out the sponsorship, planning our diet, setting a training programme and taking the safety and navigation courses, not to mention doing our normal day jobs as well.

To think Ben and I thought people were joking when they said they'd spent up to two years planning the project. When we really got stuck in to our preparations there were only four months to go until the start of the race.

By this point I'd inadvertently committed myself to the race without having secured any sponsors. As I remember it in my mind, I sat down and had a conversation with Bev about the pros and cons of doing the race and although she didn't agree about the pros or want me to do it, she said OK. Bev steadfastly believes that this talk all took place 'in my mind' and there was no discussion; one of us is wrong.

I had, though, avoided telling my rowing coach, Jürgen. I knew he wouldn't want me to take part in a race where competitors lose on average a stone and a half; having forced me to lift weights to build muscle for ten years, he did not want to see me lose it all in six weeks. I should have told him and let Ben get on with announcing to the press that we were doing the race. If we had done, getting a sponsor would not have been such a struggle against time.

I think, if I'm honest, I had concerns over people's reaction to me doing a race with a TV presenter. I was worried that it would look like I just wanted to race to be on TV, otherwise I'd have chosen a better partner to help win the race. Those concerns disappeared quickly over the course of our preparations, when I began to get to know Ben. The Atlantic Rowing Race is about far more than just being able to row. Two British international rowers started a previous race and lasted just one day before being rescued by helicopter, whereas Debra Veal had continued on her own when her husband, an experienced rower, had had to leave the boat because of his fear of the open ocean. This race is more about the mind and less about the body, and I was confident that Ben had the qualities needed to tough it out in a battle with the mind. He had completed the gruelling Marathon des Sables, spent a lot of time

at sea and a year on a deserted island. As I said earlier, do not be fooled by the accent; competitiveness is not class-based.

What he can't do, however, is row. And by the time I definitively made up my mind to race he didn't have the time left in which to get the movement naturally engrained, which is vital when you're going to be rowing for twelve solid hours a day. Given more preparation time I would have had no worries, but as our boat was not due to touch the water until we were out in the Canaries, it was clear that Ben would have to complete all of his rowing education on the Ergo machine in the gym.

BEN

We were nowhere near ready. Not only did we have to build our boat, but we had to pass a Yachtmaster Ocean Theory course, and pass a sea survival test, not to mention organizing the shipping of our boat and equipment and addressing the small business of my learning to row. It was a mountain to climb, but James was still keen to keep shrum.

Without any sponsors, I was forced to buy the boat against my mortgage. James still hadn't confirmed his involvement – I trusted James, but I was again facing a nagging doubt in terms of his commitment. Why was he so eager to keep it a secret? We were running out of time, and by now I had invested nearly £30,000 of my own money in the project. It was nearly the end of the financial year and most companies and businesses had long allocated all their sponsorship budgets. If we didn't find sponsors now, we never would and the race would be off.

As for the boat itself, that was still just a wooden shell. I had a list of 200 components that would have to be fitted and added before she was ocean-worthy, and while James may have been a rower, neither of us had a clue about ocean-rowing boats. We had to find solar panels and batteries, a VHF radio and navigation lights, Sea-me and GPS units, antennae and a stove. Most people had been training on their boats all year. Ours wasn't even waterproofed.

As time marched on, I became even more concerned about our lack of preparation. James needed to make a firm commitment to the project, and we arranged to meet once again at the Hogarth.

We needed \$70,000 and so far didn't have a penny. James assured me it would be fine, but I wasn't so confident. The problem was that few people had heard about the race; there had been little pre-publicity about the event and neither companies nor broadcasters were willing to invest in something 'invisible'.

The answer seemed obvious; we needed to make a big announcement, make a splash about our participation and then proactively target sponsors whose profiles would fit with the ideals of the race. I needed James's total commitment or we wouldn't make it to the start line. We had just four months until the off: it was now or never.

We had some positive leads, however. The *Daily Telegraph* were keen to be involved with the project. If we gave them the exclusive announcement then, depending on the news of the day, they would try to give us the front page. It was too good an opportunity to miss. I found an old Atlantic pairs boat that was moored up in London and towed it down to Putney, from where we had it tugged down the Thames to the Houses of Parliament. James and I took our positions in the unfamiliar boat and rowed up and down, while a photographer snapped away from an inflatable. The announcement not only made the front page, but also the double-page centrepiece. We were thrilled, the *Daily Telegraph* went on to ask for a regular diary, and BBC daytime commissioned a one-hour documentary. But we still lacked a sponsor and, more significantly, a rowable boat.

It was mid-August, and there was a great deal yet to be done. I discovered the name of a Devon-based boat builders called Rowsell & Adkin, which I was assured was the best in the business. Not only had Justin Adkin made and fitted ocean rowboats before, but he was also taking part in this year's event.

'Blimey, you're a bit late,' Justin marvelled.

'Yes, but can you do it?' I implored.

'Do what?'

'Get the boat ready.'

'From what?' he continued.

'I don't know.'

'What do you mean you don't know?'

'I've haven't seen it yet,' I admitted.

I explained that we had nothing and that we needed everything. I could practically hear him scratching his head down the phone.

'Yeah, I don't see why not,' he said finally.

At last we were going to have a boat, though we still didn't have any money to pay for it. I was now nearly £35,000 in the red and things weren't looking hopeful.

JAMES

In September 2005 we went down to the boat builders in Devon to see our boat. Woodvale ocean-rowing boats come in what looks like an Ikea flat pack. In order to decide how we wanted the boat set up, we took a finished one for a spin. It must be daunting for someone who can't row to go out in a boat with someone whose job it has been for over a decade. I should have exhibited patience and understanding – but then Ben should have got himself in good shape and made the effort to get down to a rowing club...

BEN

It was intimidating pulling into the Leander Club car park in Henley on a brisk autumn day. I felt rather inferior as I strode into this rowing Mecca, yet there was an almost businesslike air about the club as elite Olympic rowers chatted in pairs and downed vast jugs of fluid between gruelling sessions in the gym. I was about to have my first rowing lesson. As if that wasn't bad enough, I was going to undertake my first proper training session with James while the entire current Olympic squad, including their trainer, Jürgen Grobler, looked on. I had butterflies as I changed into my rowing gear and walked to the water's edge.

It was a beautiful day, and dozens of people – one of whom was Sir Steven Redgrave – watched from Henley Bridge as I stepped into the skinny boat. I was fairly scared. This was only the second time in my life that I had ever stepped into a scull, and I was being scrutinized by the

rowing glitterati. My biggest concern was capsizing the boat with James in it. How would I ever live it down?

The boat was unfeasibly unstable, I thought as we pulled away from the safety of the shore. My poor strokes were punctuated by regular crabs, and swear words, and I would just get into the groove when I'd lose my balance. Sweat streamed down my face as we laboured upriver. Jürgen Grobler, James's mentor and trainer and perhaps the single most successful rowing coach of his generation, had observed me as I entered the boat and commented on my physique to one of his colleagues: 'Have you seen his hands? He has the hands of an office worker.'

Not exactly a ringing endorsement.

James was remarkably calm given that this was the first time he had been in a boat with me and that I quite obviously could not row, but he kept his cool as he coached me. All was fine until we decided to return to the club. A lone rower had turned back at the same time as us. We had 500 metres to go and before I knew what was happening, it became a race. I pulled as hard as I could on the oars as James bellowed instructions, and yet even with the two of us, he started to close in on us. The closer he came the more I panicked. Soon he was alongside, and with a quick flick of his oars he edged ahead. 'No!' I screamed pulling harder still. We had just been beaten by a single oarsman.

'Jürgen was watching you,' James said casually as we changed.

'What did he say?' I asked nervously.

'He said you're going to have a very sore back.'

JAMES

I was shocked by how little natural feel he had for a boat, and he was stunned by my lack of sympathy with him being, well, crap. I could have shown more patience but there was no point in hiding from Ben the massive improvements he needed to make in his technique and his fitness. If he didn't sort out the fundamentals we could find ourselves in real trouble at sea. Luckily our Atlantic boat required far less technique than the type of boats used at the Olympics, but he was going to have to put more effort into getting the movement as flowing as possible, though

most of that work would have to be done on land now. I, on the other hand, had to temper my frustrations at his rowing ability. I should have realized that would be his level when I signed up to race with him, but the problem was that as the race approached, my competitive spirit well and truly kicked in. I just couldn't imagine starting a race knowing that we didn't have a chance of winning. To have any chance at all, Ben would have to make some huge steps in fitness. The trouble was, he was going to Africa for three weeks.

We had an honest chat after the session; I promised that I could not and would not expect Olympic performances from him, saying that there would only be anger on my part if he had not got himself to the start line in the best shape possible. That was vital not only for him but for me as well. If he arrived at the start line not having prepared it was going to hurt him physically and he wouldn't enjoy the experience but, more importantly to me, it would affect our boat speed. After all, I'd promised my wife it wasn't going to take us that long.

BEN

James's agent had decided to pull in a big gun, Justin 'Muzza' Murray, a sponsorship agent whose last project had been London's 2012 Olympic bid. If anyone was going to help us with a sponsor, it was Muzza.

Meanwhile, as we moved into September, I found a sailing instructor willing to guide us through the gruelling ocean Yachtmaster Ocean Theory course, a week of intensive astro-navigational training followed by an exam. The certificate was an obligatory requirement for the race.

We had just a week to take the course and pass the exam or we wouldn't be going anywhere. To make matters worse, this was the last free week either of us had before the race. We had discovered that another rower, Andrew Morris, a shipping magnate from Nottingham, also had to take the course and so he joined our little group as we learnt all about astro-navigation in my Notting Hill flat. It must have been a strange sight, the four of us standing in the middle of Notting Hill Gate, sextant in hand, calculating our position from the sun, pretending houses were ships and roofs, masts. I was overwhelmed by the theory and

number-crunching involved in the course.

Classes began at 8 a.m. and finished mid-evening. I laboured into the middle of the night to work on the homework, bamboozled by the complex mathematics.

'Most people spend months learning the theory,' explained Mike, our instructor, as he talked us through another complicated equation. My head hurt. I hadn't used maths so much since school; not even university taxed me as this course did. I couldn't sleep for the numbers spinning in my head.

'How can everyone have passed this course?' I wondered as I struggled through. James on the other hand seemed to take it in his stride; he appeared to have inherited his father's numerical mind. It was the first time we had both spent any time together though, and I enjoyed his company. It was the start of us working as a team.

Exam day was a daunting prospect. If either of us failed, the project would collapse. The two-hour exam seemed to take an eternity, while Mike immersed himself in various sailing books.

It was unbearable waiting for the results. Failure wasn't an option.

'Hello, Ben, I've got your results,' said Mike tantalizingly down the phone.

'You've both passed.'

'YEEEESSSS!' I punched the air. 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.'

We had done it. We had worked as a team. I immediately called James with the news.

'Who got the higher score?' was his immediate question. I hadn't even thought to ask for individual marks, let alone find out who got the higher one. We had passed, wasn't that enough?

It was a simple question, but one that was to define each of our characters very neatly indeed.

At last we were making real progress. The boat was under construction, we'd passed the exam, and the TV production company Twofour had begun work on the documentary, but what we really needed was money.

To make matters worse I had to spend October in Namibia filming

another series of BBC's *Wild in Africa*. We held an emergency meeting during which we divided up tasks. James, we concluded, would be responsible for getting the boat ready and securing sponsorship, while I would acquire all the equipment we needed and organize shipping, logistics and communications.

I bought life-rafts, EPIRBs (emergency position-indicating radio beacons, which send a distress pulse to a satellite that is picked up by Falmouth coastguard in the UK – we had four, one fixed to the boat's bulkhead, a hand-held one in our grab bag and we each had one built into our watches), flares (red and white), expedition food, a computer and satellite phones capable of reaching the outside world from the middle of the ocean. My house was brimming with strange and unfamiliar equipment, while my bank manager called on a daily basis.

Training was still proving a problem. James had organized for a Concept 2 rowing machine to be dropped off at my house and I had been using it in my garden, but with so much planning and organizing to do, exercising had fallen by the wayside. I was dangerously unfit for the race ahead and would have to take the rowing machine with me to Africa.

'What's that?' asked a customs official at the airport in Windhoek.

'A rowing machine,' I explained, gesturing a rowing movement with my arms.

He looked perplexed.

'A boat?' he puzzled, looking at the bubble-wrapped contraption.

We were, of course, in Namibia, one of the driest countries in the world, a vast, rolling expanse of desert and scrubland.

'For the land,' I explained

'A land boat?' he asked.

'Sort of,' I smiled.

'Why?' he continued.

Here we go, I thought. This will really stump him.

'To row across the Atlantic Ocean.'

He stared at me unblinkingly.

'OK,' he nodded, 'pass,' and he ushered me through.

For a month I rose at 4 a.m. every morning to row for two hours before we began filming, and then again in the evening. I rowed in the desert, out in the bush, on the beach, in front of elephants, and more often than not in front of dozens of Namibian children, who would flock around the bizarre machine to watch the crazy Englishman making wind with the flywheel of the machine that propelled him nowhere at all.

While I made progress with my training, the same couldn't be said of our finances. We had simply left it too late. A number of companies had registered interest but that was about it. According to Muzza, some of them were worried about the implications of something going wrong; after all it was a dangerous race and they didn't want to be accountable. There had been a suggestion that a less sensitive sponsor might be keen to secure the keel of the boat – a relatively large expanse on a 23-foot rowing boat – so that should the worst happen and the boat be capsized any photographs would be dominated by the logo on the bottom of the boat, but it was an incentive none of our potential sponsors was seduced by.

And then came the breakthrough we needed.

'EDF want to sponsor us,' said James. He explained that they wouldn't sponsor us for the whole cost of the expedition but that they wanted to be the major sponsor. Now all we had to do was to find a number of companies prepared to invest small amounts and we would be out of the red. Costs had spiralled and we had now invested nearly £70,000 of our own money. EDF's involvement as major sponsor had the desired effect and by the time I flew back to the UK, Vodafone, MITIE, The Glenlivet and FRL had all joined. We were in the black and in business.

I hit the ground running; with just a few weeks until we were due in the Canaries, we still had the sea survival course to pass.

The boat, christened *The Spirit of EDF Energy*, had to be collected from Justin's workshop in Devon, packed in London and then delivered to PA freight in Newark. James and I drove down to Devon in my Land-Rover to collect our precious boat.

It was strange seeing her. We had done the one thing everyone had advised against us doing: we had got someone else to fit her. We knew nothing of her wiring, or fixings. She was as much of a stranger as James

and I were to one another, and we didn't have a great deal of time to get to know one another.

We hauled the trailer out of the workshop and connected her to the back of the Landy and started the long journey home. Neither of us was used to pulling loads, and it was only after we got to London that we discovered that she hadn't been tied down properly and that during the journey she had shifted and fallen from her frame, damaging the keel. She hadn't even been in the water and already she had taken a knock. It was not a good omen, I thought, as we parked her at Chiswick Rowing Club by the river Thames.

She was due to be shipped in just a few days and we still had to pack her with our equipment. We unloaded the kit to James's home, emptying the food in piles. It seemed impossible that we would ever get it all on board. Time was running out and we eventually resigned ourselves to pack everything, and to edit out things that we wouldn't need when we were in the Canaries. The next day I drove the half-ton boat up to Newark and bade her farewell. The next time I'd see her was in La Gomera in three weeks' time.

In the meantime the RNLI had invited James and me to a sea survival day, not normally open to the public; they had heard about our exploits after my girlfriend Marina and I took part in the RNLI raft day at Marlow on the Thames. Marina, her sister Chiara, Chiara's boyfriend and I had built a raft for the race that subsequently sank before we even made it to the start line, warranting a health check by the St John ambulance crew, a cup for 'First to sink' and now an invitation to the RNLI HQ in Poole.

'We thought it might be useful after your Marlow experience,' explained Jo, the press officer, looking genuinely concerned.

The course included learning about flares, life jackets and EPIRBs and culminated with us aboard a life-raft in a full-blown storm. It wasn't a real one of course, but it surely felt like it as they started the wave machine in the cold pool and turned off the lights. Rain poured from the ceiling and lightning flashed, while wind machines tossed our little raft around the huge waves. Water hoses were directed at the raft's exit flap to ensure we stayed inside.

James and I wallowed around in the water, dressed in our heavy foulies and wellies. We bailed and took sea sickness tablets that turned out to be Smarties. James went green but before he could be sick I snapped one of the light sticks I had been given in case of 'emergency'. I had heard the bass thud of a helicopter above and concluded that it would be clever to snap the stick and wave it so that they knew where we were. Of course this was only a simulation, but I was sure they would be impressed with my ingenuity.

Suddenly the wind and waves stopped and the lights came on, as half a dozen RNLI staff dived into the water, and a whistle blew. 'Are you OK?' screamed the instructor.

'You dick,' laughed James. I'd just ruined the whole exercise.