

New World Record for Seattle Rowers

Four Seattle rowers have just entered the Guinness Book of World Records as the first team to ever row unassisted across the Atlantic from mainland US to the mainland of UK. They completed their (just under) 69-day voyage on Sunday, August 20, 2006. The four rowers, Jordan Hanssen, Dylan Le Valley, Greg Spooner and Brad Vickers, rowed from New York Harbor to Falmouth Harbor and in the meantime won first place in the inaugural Transatlantic Rowing Race. The finish line to the race was a 42-mile meridian segment, whose north end was 4 miles south of Bishop Rock Lighthouse. The midpoint of the line (06 27 W, 49 27 N) is about 72 miles from Falmouth Harbor. They crossed the finish line within one mile of the precise center of the line, with the nearest competitor 250 nmi behind them and the next nearest back 550 nmi.

In fact, they could actually claim a more encompassing rowing record as the first vessel in recorded history to ever row across the Atlantic and end up precisely where they said they were going. All rowers headed for England in the past ended up in Ireland or took a tow before ending up in France, or they just stopped wherever they crossed the Bishop Rock meridian and took a tow to UK.

After following OAR NW closely over the past two months, it is easy to see why it has been so difficult to maintain a chosen course in the past. These ocean going rowboats are very sensitive to wind and waves, not to mention ocean currents. Ocean currents though just some 0.5 to 0.75 kts on average away from main streams, do not normally affect larger vessels, power or sail, but they mean a lot to a boat whose average speed in a seaway is only 2 kts or so. And contrary to areas like the Gulf Stream where predictions are remarkably good, these random ocean currents cannot be predicted—despite all the efforts of the super computers and extensive satellite data.

The OAR NW team managed to succeed where others were less successful because, first, they are exceptional rowers (a champion rowing team in college) with exceptional conditioning and training, and, second, they took careful advantage of all the latest weather and oceanographic resources available to them, many of which were simply not available just three or four years ago. They did it technically right and they were well prepared, but it still must boil down to exceptional courage, stamina, and comradery... and it can never go unsaid when crossing the ocean in any small vessel, they were blessed with more good luck than bad.

We are especially happy about their achievement because the four rowers studied navigation and weather tactics in great detail at Starpath School of Navigation for a long period in preparation for this race. Besides GPS and the latest satellite communications and weather resources, they also each learned celestial navigation and ocean routing, including in depth studies of the Gulf Stream, which they negotiated admirably to great advantage. They also took the uncommon position that each would take an equal part in the navigation and tactics, so each one studied all the topics. It was a good phi-



Jordan Hanssen, Greg Spooner, Brad Vickers, and Dylan LeValley (Top to bottom. All photos compliments of Ron LeValley)

losophy for such a venture, as they did not know who would be required to do what, when, with two rowing at all times.

They obviously learned their lessons well. We are immensely proud of this team. They had adverse conditions throughout much of the race and in fact had “Hurricane Alfredo” pass directly over the top of them—it was not technically a hurricane because of its high latitude at the time, but by the time it reached them it had documented winds of over 70 kts, far more than it had as a tropical storm in FL and the Gulf of Mexico (it takes just 64 kts to be a hurricane in lower latitudes).

They also had the bad luck of a totally unusual High pressure system centered just west of UK once they got close, which brought north winds for the last two weeks of the voyage. They had to fight for every mile to guard against being pushed below the Finish Line. Had they not had to pass through that latitude gate of the finish line of the race, they would have had the chance to set still another record of the fastest 4-man row across the Atlantic finishing “anywhere” on the longitude of the Bishop Rock Lighthouse. The record for that is 60 days and

16 hr set in a similar vessel in 2005, which crossed the meridian far south of the newly imposed latitude gate, off the coast of France.

At the time the Seattle vessel was positioned to go for that record they could have blasted off in a SSE direction to cross the line roughly where the record holders had crossed it, but they had to tread water and claw their way north in preparation for a forecasted long period of strong northerlies. If they did not do that, they would not have been able to get through the latitude gate of the finish line.

So the record to the Bishop Rock meridian had to be given up in lieu of the bigger prizes of winning the race and being the first to go where they said they were going. It was good navigation discipline. It is, after all, a basic tenet of good navigation to arrive at your intended destination.



Photo taken after crossing the finish line, about 35 miles out from Falmouth Harbor. You can learn more about the race and the team and the Oar Northwest project at their website www.oarnorthwest.com.

“They have made America proud!” — quoted from an ABC News report.

Companies that donated navigation and communication products and services that contributed to the success of the team include:

OCENS: WeatherNet and Grib Explorer software

Global Marine Networks: tracking system and email

Nobeltec: Visual Navigation Suite and Passport Charts

Starpath School of Navigation: Pre-trip training and support in navigation and ocean routing underway

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