

# A MID-LIFE LESS ORDINARY

From Ultramarathon Insanity  
to Rowing the Atlantic at Fifty

"Pete's inspiring story is  
testament to his doggedness  
and determination."

Nathan Hines  
Former Scotland rugby union international

"Resilience and determination are  
key to any sporting endeavour and  
Pete has both in abundance."

Sir Matthew Pinsent CBE

PETER WRIGHT  
with Steve Wright



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## Chapter 1

# Into the unknown

LOOKING BACK at the big moments in life, it's hard not to look for the germ of the idea – the moment or situation in which the journey began. For some it might be a moment of inspiration, while for others it's witnessing somebody do something similar, prompting the decision to ape their actions.

In my case, it all started with an email from my friend, Steve Hayes:

Good morning Peter. Yes, that must be an official email as I used your full name.

Amazingly I've been given the green light by Corina and work to row the Atlantic next year (2022/2023 Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge). I had planned to do this solo and fancied the challenge of doing it solo but part of me also wants to share the experience and I'd hate to do it solo if it's something you would like to do. It would be silly for me to do a row and then you do one the following year, it wouldn't make sense financially. A few bullet points below to give you something

to think about. Obviously the main concerns will be financial, as they are for me but let me know either way.

Have a think bud and let me know what your thoughts are. Test the water with Rach and the kids and give me a shout. If you have any questions let me know, I have tons of info.

Yours Sincerely,  
Steve Hayes

How about it?

Steve was someone I'd got to know during my time both in Jersey and on the ultrarunning scene. We met in 2012 while I was training for the MDS. He was putting in the (aquatic) miles for an English Channel swim, and I went down to support him at one of his fundraising events (he later returned the favour at one of mine). We'd built up a bit of a friendship based on like-minded hobbies.

Steve is very much an 'all or nothing' type person, whether it's sea swimming in his speedos in winter, running around Jersey, or embarking on a heavy drinking session. I found him an enormously positive person to be around, and it's impossible not to have a laugh in his infectious company.

He messaged me quite a bit when I was out in the desert, with some funny messages to keep me going. One in particular made me laugh out loud when he pointed out that he was worse off than me, since his girlfriend had gone away for the weekend, and his 'downloading' plans had been adversely affected by his Wi-Fi going down on the same weekend.

When I got back from the MDS, I contacted one of my tent mates, Andy McDonald, who had performed exceptionally well out there. With this in mind, I quizzed him on how he had trained. He told me about this event called the OMM (Original Mountain Marathon), a two-day pairs event in the Brecon Beacons involving navigation and complete self-sufficiency. Steve agreed to join me, and we became mates from then on.

As you'll probably gather, having picked up this book and started turning its pages, I like a challenge. I've completed ultramarathons across desert, mountains, snow and jungle, traversed the length of an entire country on foot (admittedly it was Wales, but still), and pulled a car a marathon distance (a Smart car, but they weigh a fair amount; you try pulling one for 26 and a bit miles).

Still, rowing across an entire ocean – it's impossible not to feel more than a bit daunted by it; 3,000 nautical miles of almost unending blue – with depths of five miles at its deepest points – the majority of which comes without catching sight of another human, unless you're fortunate enough to encounter a yacht, passenger liner or cargo hauler (many of which are unmanned now, so don't expect any friendly waving from the deck). It can get a bit choppy, too – the waves have been known to reach as high as 30ft.

Then there's the issue of space: spending the entirety of your time on a boat not much bigger than a boardroom table, on which you have to store all your belongings, prepare all your food and perform all of nature's duties.

This is before we get to the physical exertion involved. Rowing as a pair, it could take anywhere between one and a half and two months. Having done a cursory bit of research, it seemed that most rowers in pairs went for the ‘two hours on, two hours off’ approach, meaning that sleep would be hard to come by – grabbed in snatches.

All this constant motion would have its consequences – weight loss being one. Even with a recommended daily calorie intake of 5,000 – around double that of the typical adult male going about his day-to-day life – you could still expect to lose potentially as much as three stone. A healthy rate of weight loss is generally a pound or two per week – obviously, this would far exceed that.

Finally, there was the rowing itself. While I’d done plenty of running and cycling, my actual experience of going out on a boat with a pair of oars was limited to the point of non-existence. ‘Nautical novice’ would probably be the most apt – not to mention accurate – description of me that you could come up with.

Not a lot of people had done it – visiting space and standing on the summit of Mount Everest are both feats that have been accomplished more frequently than rowing an ocean.

So, how about it? Absolutely.

Still, it wasn’t as simple as deciding that I was ‘up for it’. As much as people occasionally wistfully talk about getting away from all of life’s pressures by sailing off into the distance, the actual reality of that was not quite so simple.

For a start, I have a wife, two children and three dogs. Rachel has shown an immeasurable amount of



patience and understanding over the years and across the various challenges I've done – she even allowed herself to be dragged along on a few of them – but there was no getting away from the fact that this was asking a lot.

For a start, there was the massive amount of time I'd be away for. The longest I'd previously been absent was about a week – the two to three months that this would likely take massively dwarfed that.

Then there was the matter of work. Again, my employers had been incredibly supportive over the years, but I hadn't yet tested them by posing the prospect of having two months' worth of unpaid leave. An arrangement would have to be reached, and I'd have to plan ahead financially to ensure that everything was covered while I was away.

Finally, there was the challenge. Rowing the Atlantic is a big event, and safety is paramount, as you'd expect. To make ever such a slight understatement, there are significant risks associated with rowing an ocean, whether you do it as part of an organised race or outside of one (as recently as 2024, someone died while attempting to traverse the ocean, albeit not on this race). Atlantic Campaigns had an excellent reputation, and Steve and I decided that we owed it to our loved ones to do the challenge this way. We estimated the cost of taking it on could be anything from £120,000 to £140,000 – not a sum that either of us happened to have lying around in a shoebox somewhere. This would have to be funded through sponsorship.

Not to mention, all of this planning was taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and all the

restrictions that entailed. While it seems like we're out on the other side now, nobody knew what the hell was going on at the time, or what kind of impact that would have on things.

While all of these seemed like pretty big hurdles, Steve and I consoled ourselves with the fact that Jersey is a relatively affluent jurisdiction, and we'd surely find someone to help us.

Even though I'd made up my mind that it was definitely something that I wanted to do, it wasn't something I approached the prospect of seriously, partly because I didn't truly think it would be possible. This attitude was partially influenced by the fact that I was a little bit in the doghouse with Rachel already – I'd recently finished an event, during which I ran the equivalent distance in miles on every day of the month – one mile on the first, two miles on the second, and so on. Considering the amount of time I spent away from home, not to mention the physical condition I was in (those of you who are mathematicians will note that I averaged marathon distance for the last 11 days of the month), I'd received quite the bollocking from Rachel: 'Peteloaf, you know I'm your number one fan, but what was so important about running over seven hours a day on your own when we could have been getting quality family time in?'

It was a valid point because the challenge was a bit pointless, and I'd taken things a step too far doing that. I ended up eating a fair amount of humble pie, and promised to be a bit more restrained in the future. So the timing of Steve's email perhaps wasn't the best!

*There's no way I can do this*, was my original thought. *This is something that someone else does*. Still, I mentioned it to Rachel anyway, framing it as, 'Guess what Steve's just sent me!' as she happened to walk into the front room.

Her response was instant – and completely unexpected, 'Do it,' she said. She sounded deadly serious.

More than a bit surprised at the positivity of her reaction, I inexplicably proceeded to almost talk her out of her approval of my own request.

'You're still annoyed with me about the last thing I did! Are you sure?'

She responded, 'That was a silly one; this one's more you; adventurous, an opportunity of a lifetime, and doing something with a good mate.'

I wasn't going to argue the case any further – I had her endorsement!

Further strengthening my faith in humanity to accede to my requests, work was incredibly supportive, too – they knew that this was something I was into, and the fact that I was giving them two years' notice.

'You utter madman,' was the response from my boss, Chris Clark, followed up by, 'Well, you are giving us two years' notice,' and followed up again by, 'How can we help you out with the challenge?'

The last comment sums up my employers perfectly – I've never known such a people-focused company. After that chat with Chris, I think I became a permanent addition to the risk register.

We knew that getting approval from work and family was the easy part, however. Along the way, we both had to learn new skills: becoming project

managers, marketeers, finance people – we just had to become everything, as well as learning an entire new sport.

Without trying to come across as arrogant, both of us have been able to maintain challenging and rewarding careers – me in accountancy, Steve in hospitality – and, as such, we were adept at planning ahead. We quickly came up with a plan of action, the first part of which was to create a brand name for us to row under, reasoning that this would make it easier to market to prospective sponsors. ‘Pete and Steve’s insane rowing adventure’, while evocative, probably isn’t the most professional-sounding. ‘Buoy-Zone’ wasn’t much better. After much spitballing, we settled on ‘DragonFish’ – the first part reflecting Steve’s Welsh heritage, and the second nodding at my star sign, Pisces.

Having downloaded some previous competitors’ sponsorship packs and looked at how they packaged themselves, we worked out a budget to provide a fairly accurate price for everything associated with the challenge, to include buying the boat. Once we had that, we had to work out how we were going to arrange the sponsors (i.e. Gold, Silver, Bronze), get branding designed for DragonFish, set up social media accounts, get a website up and running and recruit a support crew (to include physios, personal trainers and sports masseurs). Working together, this was duly achieved.

This was the first time we’d effectively project managed together, and we complemented each other. Every other Sunday evening, we’d let ourselves into my place of work, along with a couple of bottles, and work through our plan, assigning actions and setting

deadlines. We took our respective deadlines seriously, and mutual trust was quickly cemented as we got used to a new way of working together.

I've always endeavoured to throw myself into things, and I applied the same mantra to rowing. This was essential – my only previous experience had been the occasional go on a gym rowing machine, or taking a rowing boat across the pond at my parents' old house (they had a lot of land). To this end, we visited the Jersey Rowing Club and got ourselves acquainted.

The rowing club has a few 'have a go row' sessions each year, aimed at beginners. We went down, introduced ourselves and announced what we had planned. Looking back, we could have forgiven them for laughing us out of there: 'Hi, we're here to learn how to row. On the subject, we're actually going to be rowing the Atlantic in two years. Can you help us please?'

As it turns out, our worries about experiencing a similar reaction as seen in the montage in *Cool Runnings*, where they unsuccessfully go around looking for sponsors, were very much unfounded. They were very accommodating and really supportive, with a notable mention going to Ian Blandin. A former Atlantic rower himself, he took us under his wing a bit.

Covid-induced restrictions meant that there were times when Steve and I couldn't row together, but Ian took us out solo and we learned that way. We spent a good year with the rowing club, during which time we became a regular fixture in the races in the pairs category. Despite competing against several people who had been doing this for far longer than we had, we

actually did okay overall, and even had some silverware to show for our efforts come the end of the rowing season – not bad for complete beginners!

Keeping fit was something that we were accustomed to, but this was a new sport. In addition to joining the rowing club, we became very active in the gym, and also started one-to-one Pilates. A lot of this was new to me – whenever I'd gone to the gym previously, I'd mainly stuck to the treadmills, so going to the gym and getting a programme aimed at different muscle groups was something I actually found quite fun, as I enjoyed getting a bit of structure – the big change for me was doing Pilates. We got an amazing personal teacher called Sonja Assiter – she spent an hour with us a week, doing some pretty serious stretches aimed at flexibility and injury prevention. I'm not the most flexible of people, so I found this difficult at first, but stuck at it and enjoyed it. Our location was always a local park in St Helier at around 6.30am, so wind, rain or shine, we were there being put through our paces by Sonja.

The most important course of action, naturally, was to actually get hold of a boat. There were only so many ocean-rowing boats on the planet, and we needed one quickly and (relatively) cheaply. Some teams had bought them new, but this wasn't an option for us. Once the race was signed up for and the deposit paid, we started looking for a boat to purchase.

Thanks to a short-term loan from my dad, we were able to purchase one. An evening phone conversation along the lines of, 'Dad, I've decided to do that challenge that you didn't seem particularly keen about – how do

you feel about lending me £20,000 for it so we can find a boat for sale?’

I explained that I anticipated it being a very short-term loan, since we were actively seeking sponsors. Dad was great, replying, ‘Pete, no problem, although don’t tell your mum, since I want no evidence I am associated with this.’

Meanwhile, Steve had been researching potential candidates, and duly identified a boat called *Sogno Atlantico*, which had just completed its fourth Atlantic crossing courtesy of a couple of French guys called Lilian and Guilhem. It had a good history, and we were encouraged to hear that it had never capsized (always a good characteristic in a boat). It was an Adkins Offshore rowing boat (not a Rannoch like most of the boats in the race), which meant that we’d be competing in the ‘Open Class’ category. It was about ten years old and looked its age on account of the general exterior condition and aged equipment, and was on the heavier side, but it complied with the rules.

One factor that complicated things was the fact that the boat was docked in Marseille. With both the UK and France still in lockdown, we couldn’t go there to personally inspect it ourselves pre-purchase, so we had to take a bit of a leap of faith and get someone to collect it for us. Despite this, we were happy – just the knowledge that the boat had recently done the crossing and arrived back in one piece was enough for us.

Predictably, on arrival into Jersey, it was a bit of a mess, but this wasn’t the worst part. Upon seeing the boat, my inner *Star Wars* geek took over. I said to Steve, ‘This bucket of bolts is never going to get us across the Atlantic.’

Steve just smiled, rather than telling me a positive fact about the rowing equivalent of the Kessel Run.

There was a hole in the hull of the boat, which we strongly suspected was down to some questionable forklift driving during transit. We trusted the sellers, and knew the boat had left Marseille in good condition, so we were willing to give them the benefit of the doubt. Luckily, we managed to get the hole fixed very quickly by a fibreglass chap in Jersey.

The interior wasn't much better, for different reasons. The boat arrived almost exactly how Lilian and Guilhem had left it upon arrival in Antigua, so we had to empty everything and clean it from top to bottom. We also had to work out what equipment we could keep and what we'd need to throw out – this took a while, since neither of us were sailors, and didn't really know our way around a boat yet. This would all change.

We unveiled the boat at the Super League Triathlon – a very popular event in Jersey that brought a lot of people to the area. By this point, we had about half of the sponsors lined up – it was an opportunity for us to put stickers on the boat with 'Your logo here', to give an idea of what to expect if you chose to become a sponsor. While we didn't get a lot of interest on this front, it gained a fair bit of attention, as a lot of people hadn't seen this kind of boat before, so it was a useful weekend.

In terms of a name for the boat, officially we never changed this, as it's supposedly bad luck to do so (it was in our best interests to keep Poseidon on our side, after all), but we told our title sponsor that he could give it an official race name, which would be on the side of the boat. He chose 'Lilly Mae', the name of



his granddaughter – a lovely gesture, I'm sure you'll all agree.

However, while we were at the Super League Triathlon, one of the visitors introduced herself: 'Hi, I'm the mum of Lilly Mae. By the way, you've spelled her name wrong.' Whoops! Not wanting to take the chance of misspelling the name of our own boat turning out to be bad luck too, we got it changed after that.

We also went to Teignmouth for one of the mandatory rowing courses, attended with a company called SeaSports Southwest. It was classroom-based for about a week – with the use of the pool for the survival part of the course – and we did it with about 20 other rowers, so it was fun to absorb all the knowledge associated with the challenge and ocean rowing in general, as well as brainstorming ideas with other teams. The days were quite full-on, but it was useful to immerse ourselves in the ocean-rowing world we'd joined for a whole week.

We attended alongside two other teams that would be competing in the same year's race as us: solo rower Mike Bates (aka The Atlantic Grappler), and the trio of Laura, Millie and Frankie (aka The Atlantic Girls). We all stayed in the same B&B for the week, and there were one or two boozy nights as we got to know each other a bit more. The girls were lovely – all close friends from university looking to achieve their dream together.

Mike, a seriously impressive and focused individual, was a Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt and a former MI5 agent. He was deadly serious, but had a great sense of humour. I remember one of his quotes when he appeared on one of the daily recordings when we were

out in La Gomera. It was something like, 'I'd like to say I rowed an ocean, rather than half an ocean or a quarter of an ocean.' He was of course referring to the challenge in relation to the team size, and when this was aired in front of the whole fleet, there were resounding boos in his direction. I remember glancing over and seeing him with his head in his hands.

The final day of the course was particularly useful, since this was a dedicated ocean-rowing day course facilitated and hosted by Ian Couch from Atlantic Campaigns. Ian has been a key figure in the race for years, and the day spent with him was invaluable. I came away with pages of notes and lists of actions.

Tim Cox was our teacher on this course, and Steve and I both formed an instant friendship with him – we knew he did weather routing for people, and asked if he'd do that on our race. Barry Hayes was recommended to us when it came to managing our social media while on the row, so we recruited him to do just that, and put aside some budget to get him on board. In hindsight, investing in Barry was one of the best decisions we made. He'd completed a couple of rows himself, and was a true ocean-rowing expert and amazing at Atlantic storytelling.

Things were falling into place, and we came back to Jersey feeling a lot more prepared, but there was still plenty more to do. Mike already had his boat in the water, and was streets ahead from where we currently were in respect of our plan, so I did feel a little daunted by this. Our number-one action on getting home was to get our ocean-rowing boat in the water, get some much-needed practical experience and commence our qualifying hours. The race was on.