



"When you are going through Hell – Keep going!" Winston Churchill

Coaching for the extreme – Part 3

By Stefan Vilner

Context:

This is the third instalment in my series of describing the work of the Performance Coach with an Ocean Rower, before, during and after the Atlantic crossing.

For the two previous articles, I have described my work with a team of four rowers, but for the final chapter, I would like to use the example of the work I did in the 2021/2022 edition of the **Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge** with the solo rower Lasse Wulff Hansen a.k.a. **Ocean Warrior**.

Lasse is now among the worlds most experienced ocean rowers, having successfully rowed across the Atlantic three times – in a duo, as the skipper of a four-man crew and this year as a solo.

The mental preparation and the experience of the solo rower is completely different from that experienced by a team and crossing the Atlantic solo is almost a completely different event, when comparing the mental challenges, it offers.

Not surprisingly, the isolation is the biggest of the mental challenges for the solo rower, something the team rower does not experience in the same degree.

On the contrary, you are never alone on a team boat and the very limited space creates its very own mental challenges to the rowers.

As a solo rower, Lasse Wulff Hansen crossed the Atlantic in 55 days, winning the solo class and passing several boats in other classes while doing this. A massive result and with Lasse's previous experience, something he could put into a larger perspective.



Saturday 5th February 2022 at 09:40 local time Antigua – the goal line!

Data:

During the 55 days, we had a steady stream of communications as I doubled as Lasse's shore-based operations center plus administering weekly cognitive and mental tests (Numerical, abstract and word association) via the Satellite Phone, leading to 40+ pages worth of notes and test documentation.

The point of the weekly cognitive and mental test in general was to gather research data but also monitor the rower's cognitive capacity and look for signs of burn-out, ego-depletion, task saturation and other signs of cognitive impairment brought about by lack of sleep, physical exertion and stress.

Insight:

During the pre-race phase of the race and during the race itself we had clear and succinct discussions around the impact of the isolation and how it would be critical to have time for thorough de-brief sessions post-race for Lasse to be able for him to return to the real world and re-engage with people around him. We made sure, during the pre-race work to spend time examining the

existential element of isolation and how it is one of our human conditions, in order to be able to understand it when it became real during the row, as the world moves on in its pre-determined path for the people back on “Terra Firma”, whereas the rower is permanently in a state of isolation and due to physical and mental exertion in an altered state of consciousness and reality.

So, during the row, the role of the support team is to support the rower in working through the different challenges, be it technical, physical as well as mental. As the performance coach is unable to change the situation for the rower, especially the solo rower suffering the sometimes-debilitating effects of the isolation, it is extremely important to work with the rower’s perception of agency and his ability to alter the impact of the isolation by altering his specific attitude to the challenge. To quote Viktor Frankl, *“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way!”* (Frankl, 1959)



Crossing the goal line, it is over, no longer alone!

So, when the goal line has been crossed, the collaboration of the rower and the coach of re-integrating into real life begins.

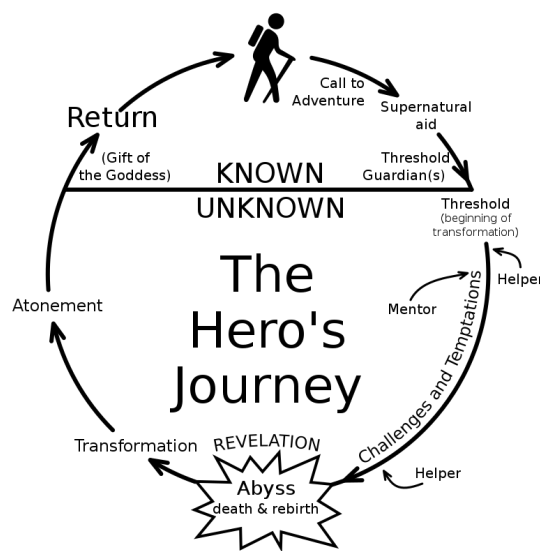
Elation, satisfaction, emptiness

Very quickly after the initial elation and satisfaction of the completion of a project that have been ongoing for years, an existential emptiness rears its head in the mind of the rower. This is not unique to the solo rower but every single ocean rower I have spoken to.

“Ok, well done, but what is next?” The rower has been laser focused on the project for years and now, from one day to the next, it is all over. The paradox has been brilliantly worded by the Head Safety Officer for The Talisker Atlantic Challenge, Ian Couch: *“You are only an ocean rower the moment you step ashore at the end of the row and then you will probably never row an ocean again.”*

Almost immediately, the social consciousness starts bombarding the still fragile mind with messages about the needs of children, spouse, friends and all the other social obligations that have been down prioritized during the project. The inner dialogue that has been on mute for a long time starts increasing in volume.

The return of the rower follows the Hero’s Journey (Campbell, 1949), where the hero (rower) returns from the unknown to the known world.



The hero’s journey from “The hero with a thousand faces” by Joseph Campbell

The rower experiences the bizarre schism between people’s desire to hear everything about the experience and at the same time losing interest if the narration takes more than five minutes. While knowledge of the unknown world is enticing to the uninitiated, it is difficult for someone who never left the known world to comprehend, and it can be unpleasant for the non-rower to have a mirror held up to show what they feel they do not have the courage to do.

So, the role of the performance coach in the de-brief is to create a space/room for the rower to exhaust the experiences and feelings associated, to enable the rower to experience a sense of mental completion to match the feeling of the physical completion experienced when crossing the goal line. Inside this process of exhausting the mental experience is the seed for the meaning of the whole process, the purpose of the quest and an opportunity to close the project in a meaningful way.

Many rowers, extreme endurance athletes and people completing massive work projects often emerges from the project with a feeling of emptiness and a desire to put something new and equally meaningful in place of the void.

A significant amount of the rowers completing an ocean crossing makes very large changes to their lives within the first 6 month of returning home. They resign from their jobs, they get divorced, they start another huge project or endeavor.

There is obviously nothing wrong with either of these actions if they are based on rational considerations.

My very subjective claim – however – is that they are not!

The combination of the existential emptiness and subsequent meaninglessness, the coming home with a new knowledge of the unknown world and deep insights and learning about themselves that they cannot share with others and the lack of a meaningful closure to the adventure, drives them to making decisions with far reaching impacts for themselves and their families that is more an escape away than a voyage towards something.

Over time many rowers experience a “Regression towards the mean” the tendency for extremely high or extremely low scores to become more moderate (i.e., closer to the mean) upon retesting over time as formulated by statistical psychologists (American Psychology Association). Lives return to the same profile and everyday life as before the row. And despite new job, new spouse and new motorcycle, the emptiness is still there. The learning and self-insight has not been properly internalized.

Conclusion:

The role of the performance coach in the “After Phase” of an ocean row or any other extreme endeavor, is to help and support the person/athlete in the process of returning to the real world!

Many athletes are lost in the perpetual repetition of finding bigger, wilder, bolder projects, leaving a trail of broken jobs and relationships, and never reaching the goal line of meaning and purpose, but with strong coaching we can help them to find the meaning in the endeavor and internalize all the learnings and watch the athlete grow mentally, spiritually, and emotionally.



Completion!

And when the desire for the next project starts awakening, it can be built on the foundation of the learnings and insights internalized during the de-brief coaching process and the athlete starts from a new and higher vantage point of self-efficacy and self-agency (Bandura, 1997) enabling him/her to build a new opportunity for meaningful growth and self-development and not begin yet another flight from existential emptiness.

The performance coaching then comes full circle with the establishing of a new project. Although both the athlete and the coach has done a full project circle, they both start at a much higher level. The project Pre-Phase now builds on the learnings and self-insights from the previous project and both athlete and coach are much better equipped to set goals and lay down realistic plans for the coming endeavor and its successful completion.

Fact Box on Lasse Wulff Hansen, The Ocean Warrior:

Personal: 35 years of age, married to Sanni with two daughters

Mission: To row all the oceans of the earth!

Passion: Exploring the limits of human performance

Vocation: Inspiring military veterans with PTSD to embrace life and grow

Profession: Officer in the Royal Danish Army

Next project: Rowing across the Eastern Pacific as skipper of a four crew

See more about:

Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenges. <https://www.taliskerwhiskyatlanticchallenge.com/>

Ocean Warrior: <https://oceanwarrior.dk/>

Further reading:

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: the exercise of control*, New York: W.H. Freeman.

Brymer, Eric (2010) *Risk and extreme sports: A phenomenological perspective*. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 13(1/2), pp. 218-239.

Campbell, Joseph (1949) *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Frankl, Viktor E. (1959) *Mans search for meaning*, Beacon Press

American Psychology Association, Dictionary of Psychology

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