The Great Pacific Race of 2014: by Caspar Zafer

I'd always wanted to row an ocean, having read about some of the early ocean rowers, from Frank Samuelsen and George Harbo to some more recent adventures and the Woodvale Atlantic challenge. I've always thought long endurance tests are the ultimate physical and mental challenge and, having rowed to a pretty decent level at University, rowing as a discipline seemed to make sense, though Ocean-rowing and regatta/Head-racing have little in common, I later found out. I'd done a few open-water swimming events and running events, but nothing like an ocean voyage. In January 2014, when I got back after a Christmas vacation, I was simply googling ocean-rowing one day and came across The Great Pacific Race. As it was to start in June I initially thought I'd probably missed the boat, as I knew the preparation time for such an event was fairly lengthy (the general feeling is that getting to the start is just as difficult as the race) however, after a phone call to the race Director, Chris Martin, I realized it was possible if I could juggle work around it. The Pacific seemed like a great challenge, as it's been attempted less often and has a mystique about it. I don't mean in any way to belittle the Atlantic race, it just seemed more of an adventure. My early thoughts were who, from my rowing days, could I get to row, either as a pair or a four. However, I soon realized that A) most people were not interested because of its duration, and the fact that some rowers had lost their lives on the Pacific, and B) those who were interested needed more time to prepare. My thinking was, if I didn't do it now I probably never would. As luck would have it the race director was putting together a boat with just these people in mind, individuals without a crew. A crew named 'Uniting Nations' was put together, made up of me, a Korean (Junho Choi), a Kiwi (Craig Hackett) and a Dutchman (Andre Kiers). We chatted at length over Skype about the kind of training we'd done, and decided to arrive in Monterey, California, a month before the start, to train as a crew. In the remaining time before we met we had to fulfill the race requirements, which were fairly lengthy and included first aid courses, navigation courses, boating courses, sea survival courses etc. These took up a lot of time and one had to travel to attend a lot of them, but they had to be done or the race organizers will not let you start. This, along with weight training and 2-4 hours a day on a rowing machine, took up most of my days from January until the start. Luckily, having rowed before, I was used to the somewhat deadly boredom of the rowing machine and managed to get through those arduous days.

In early May we arrived in Monterey and met for the first time. I took a rowing machine with me and we set a timetable of rowing all night, two hours each, to simulate the sleep deprivation we would experience in the

race - though as it turned out nothing could simulate the hell of sleep deprivation! The idea was good though, being that the rowing a machine would never stop, just as a boat wouldn't, so two people would always be rowing.

A few weeks later, the boat arrived and we were then able to train in Monterey Bay for a few weeks before the start. We also had a lot of work to do to the boat, testing equipment for safety as well as pleasing the scrutineers, who went through our boat looking for anything which didn't fulfill the race requirements, from carrying enough calories (about 7,000 each per day) to the correct equipment. Heading out for the first time into the open pacific outside the bay was an experience. We initially thought the 4-6 foot swell was pretty hard to row in, and commented on how "this really is ocean rowing"……. we had no idea! We would later be rowing in 40 foot swells.

Training….me, Craig and Andre

We trained hard with a view to win; we had four pretty fit guys and knew that, with the right discipline it was possible. Looking at the other crews, we thought it was between us and two others. One, a British four, were all ex-rowers and friends from the same University, who were pretty young (all 24); the other a mixed bag like us with a similar average age (mid thirties). There were six fours competing in total. During training we did our first 24 hour row, which was hell, we had no idea how tough it would be and this was only in the bay! We chose a timetable that we would later follow on the ocean……. we'd row one hour on/one hour off in the day and two on/two off between 9pm and 5am at night. Two row, two sleep 24/7. We finished

and collapsed into bed! How, I thought, can we do this for a month or more? It really hurt. The next day we could barely walk, and I could see the worry in my fellow crewmates' faces. If it did this to us after 24 hours, how could we go a month or more non-stop?

As race day approached *[with yet more training: L to R: Craig, me, Junho]*, the weather turned and the start was postponed by a few days. The race committee decided to have a mini 10-mile race, which we thought was a good opportunity to see how fast we were. We won, which put into our minds the fact that the race was ours to lose (as it happened, our main rivals didn't show up for this race, and the crew we thought would be a rival turned out to be far slower than we'd imagined…….. Never judge a book by its cover. The crew who turned out to be fast, we'd written-off because they just didn't look fit enough).

Finally, on the 9th of June at 10am Pacific time, the race started and we left peaceful Monterey Bay for the last time, for a 2400 mile race to Hawaii having said goodbye to girlfriends, wives, dogs etc.

Launching near the start…

We set off into an early lead, and the decision was made to kick out west as much as we could. The continental shelf running down the west coast of America makes it tough to get out west, and the currents which run clockwise around the north Pacific push you back towards land. Luckily, we had an unusual southerly wind, which kind of cancelled out the current allowing us to make headway west. The first 24 hours was very tough, we rowed hard and the excitement/worry wouldn't let us sleep, in fact we barely slept for the first week. The first night went very slowly; you'd sit in the cabin for your two hour break and shut your eyes, but sleep was impossible. We all experienced the odd things the sea does to you, the worst being the

constant whispers you imagine. The bow cabin (we'd switch seats and cabins every two days) was below the water line, and as the water ran past the boat we'd hear whispers, which obviously our brain was creating as it was possible to hold conversations with them. We realized we were creating these whispers in our heads, but couldn't stop them. I've since found out this can be fairly common at the beginning of an Ocean voyage, as the brain adjusts to the odd environment. They did eventually go, after a few weeks, but it made me realize how easy it is to go mad at sea - especially if one was alone (Donald Crowhurst being a tragic example).

The second day came after a long night, the sunrise creating high spirits. We could no longer see land as we were really out there now. We found out via satellite phone that we were in the lead, and we went into the day with a boost. Meals also create a boost, these consist of dehydrated food which you rehydrate, similar to camping food. We'd rehydrate with cold water so they didn't taste of much, so it's rather dull and should simply be looked at as fuel, but the body loves you for it all the same. We also took protein bars which were a welcomed change. For liquids we had an electric desalinator and an emergency hand-pump desalinator (which we were thankful for as our main one broke after just one week).

We noticed the swell getting larger and larger on the second day and by afternoon it was 10-15 feet. Night approached, and the swell had now grown to 20 feet and waves were coming over the side, knocking us about. By around midnight the rowers were getting pushed out of their seats, and the waves were constantly coming over the boat. We would later learn not to worry but, as it was our first time experiencing this, it was decided to set the sea anchor and sit it out in the cabins. Setting the sea anchor (or parachute anchor) is a nightmare in high seas. You have to take the rudder off and attach a line to set it. We did this pretty clumsily, and were getting smashed all over the boat, but eventually the sea anchor was set and the boat faced the waves stern to bow, as apposed to side-on, which meant it stood very little chance of capsizing (although these boats are self righting, one still doesn't want to capsize, as rowers can get detached from the boat and not make it back on board). The bow cabin is tiny and holds only one person, so one went in there and three in the stern cabin. Three people can just fit in the stern cabin, though you're like sardines. None of us could sleep, our legs were all over each other, condensation dripped from the ceiling, and it was horrible. By five am, the sea seemed calmer and two of us pulled the sea anchor in and set about rowing. We found out that our early lead had gone; another crew hadn't gone so far out west and had been in calmer waters and thus hadn't stopped. We were now neck and neck (they work out the lead by your total distance from the finish). We

were further west, they were further south.

Just a flavour of our battle with the wild Pacific

We decided then that, unless the boat was actually capsizing, we would not use the sea anchor again. We had let our fear of the ocean get to us and it had cost us the lead. We rowed hard all day and the waves got bigger and bigger again, rising to 30 foot swells. This may sound large, but the gap between the peaks when they are that big are equally large so it's not that dangerous. It feels like you're rowing over a gentle mountain range, and after a while you get used to it. We were still rowing side-on to the swell but, in the afternoon, decided we'd kicked out west enough and turned south, thus rowing with the swell. What a difference it makes, when you start surfing down these 30 foot faces, adrenalin pumping through your body and a child-like joy bubbles out of you. You still think any of these waves will take you down, but slowly get used to them. We spent that night rowing with the swell and made good ground, and by morning we had our lead back (if only by five miles) and morale was high.

The next day was personally my worst, and it was the only day I seriously thought we might die. The swell increased to around 40 feet (it's difficult to tell swell heights when in the water, they all look like Everest, but the forecast predicted these heights). The swell had changed direction and once again we were rowing slightly side-on at about a 45 degree angle, which meant danger. We were barely eating and every wave seemed like our last. Around sunset, when I was in the stroke seat rowing with Junho, a huge black wave came at us. It had what looked like a flat face coming at us with real anger. It picked us up and I was convinced this was the end,

as we were taken by its power and were surfing side-on with it, and it seemed inevitable we would capsize. I was thrown out of my seat as it came over us (my ankle was tied to a leash) and thrown into Junho's stroke side oar, which wrapped around my face and I literally went through it, breaking it with my jaw (its amazing how easily Carbon fiber brakes). Somehow, as we regained our composure, we realized we hadn't been turned over. It still amazes me how well these boats are built, they are 24 foot long and can withstand waves side-on and double their length, which seems to go against physics. Luckily, as darkness approached, the sea calmed somewhat (it's amazing how quickly the sea will change, for better or worse) and we went into the night with a large but stable swell. This was to be the biggest swell we encountered and, apart from a tropical storm near the end, was certainly the most wild of our experiences on board.

The next week or so was all about digging in. It was tough, it was cold, and we just wanted to get to the heat. We knew it would take about a week or two to reach the fabled trade winds and we just pressed on. I can't say I particularly enjoyed those weeks. We rowed every hour, and again two on two off at night, without any pleasure. The cabins were freezing, and we would shake at night though at least were now sleeping. The cabins would drip with condensation due to being air tight (if you leave the doors open and you capsize, the boat won't self-right and the race is over). Sleeping bags did little to overcome the freezing temperatures, and we started sleeping in our survival suits, which were essentially really good wetsuits, but these got damp and it seemed like you were never dry. As the days and weeks went on the sores started. First salt sores and general sores from rubbing, but then the pressure sores on your backside.

...and did I mention my hands?

You are rowing 12 hours a day, forcing pressure from your legs to your upper body on a sliding seat. Your backside takes the brunt of this and boils slowly begin to appear. There is little you can do to help these, the best option is rowing naked, but it was still way too cold. You just have to bear it. The first five minutes of your shift are the worst, the pain is excruciating but it soon calms down.

Days slowly become weeks, and you start to switch off from the row and go into a robotic action, you simply tell yourself this is what you do, you row, nothing else, its your job. As this robotic action takes over it becomes far easier, you don't feel the pain, you're in overdrive, you're not sure if

you're sleeping or rowing. Often I'd be woken to shock as I thought I was rowing and vice versa. During this time you start to think outside the boat, you analyze your life like never before, and for this reason alone I would recommend an ocean row. You are far away from your life, no roads, no people, no phones, no houses, no cooker, no work, nothing that you are familiar with, just water and the stars, you may as well be on the moon, you see nobody, no other boats, nothing. You are so far from your life that it is the best place to view it from, you are outside of your box and you are able to look in. I experienced self-analysis like never before, one deconstructs one's life for over month and it is a wonderful experience. People say that you know who you are after these events due to the physical punishment and what you can take, and I think it is because of the ability to self analyze. I, like many people, have made mistakes and I was able to face these and understand them. This row changed my direction with every stroke. At night you start seeing the wonder of the universe, you see the stars like never before and feel as though you're rowing through space - which essentially you are. Nights for me were electric, we tended not to talk at night and we rowed and thought, rowed and thought. It was, in a sense, wonderful despite the hardships of the cold, wet and all that went with it. I started thinking that these hardships were necessary, I deserved them, they were good for me, and in a way they were. There was a reason I was out there and it was a good reason. At the start I'd thought "what have I got myself into"? By now I knew what I'd got myself into and was glad to be there. When the nights warmed up they became even more glorious as you paddled under the Milky way shining above you.

Things were going well. We had gained an 80 mile lead over the last week and were pushing hard. One of our crew dropped-out a few times and took extended breaks due to tiredness, which tended to hurt us - but there is not much one can do, if somebody can't row, you just have to fill in. We needed two people rowing at all times whatever the predicament, the timetable works for four people, not for three, and I'm not sure this crewmate really thought it through, but there was little we could do but row the extra hours. The other worry, which eventually became a reality, was the electric water-maker (desalinator) which was playing up and producing salt water at times. We played with it and fixed it three times, but eventually it burnt out and we were reduced to our emergency pump for the next month. This was a hand pump, which was hard work and we needed two shifts each to produce enough water (which was still not enough, and we were essentially dehydrated for the next month). These shifts took as much effort as rowing, and so we were doing another two shifts of extra exercise and having two shifts less of rest. The only way to look at this was that it was just another challenge. Even this pump

eventually gave out, right before the end, and we had to drink ballast water, but luckily it lasted most of the journey.

As we rowed into our third week we slowly found the trade winds, and eventually stopped rowing due south and pointed our boat to Hawaii. This felt amazing, we were finally rowing to our destination. The swell was smaller and we were no longer cold at night, the sun got hotter and hotter in the day and we could eventually row naked, which was a great relief. Being able to air one's body, after wearing waterproofs in the salt, was amazing despite having to look at your fellow crewmates' naked bodies! We would row naked most of the day as the temperature became tropical in the more southern latitudes. We would also stop to swim, which I just loved. I've competed in a few open swimming events but swimming in some of the deepest waters in the world is simply like nothing else, the sea out there is vast and a deep blue. I'd take a diving mask and see nothing but this deep deep blue. No fish, nothing, just endless blue. I will never forget swimming out there especially when alone.

Swimming in the deep blue Pacific

We would swim every day after going to the loo - which brings me to one of the less pleasurable experiences of ocean rowing!……. Obviously, a boat of that size has no lavatory of any sort and you have a few options of 'how to go'. Firstly, peeing is pretty simple…… over the edge or in a bottle, which you use when in the cabin (this can go wrong when the boat gets bumped by a wave as it did on many an occasion. Ocean rowing boat cabins do not smell good at the end of a voyage). For a number-two you either have a bucket or it's over the side. Initially we were worried that we

wouldn't be able to go in front of each other, it being a personal thing, but after a couple of weeks you all go together, often while chatting. The personal life is all but gone and you become hardened to such things. In a way you are far more natural - we'd then wash ourselves off in the sea. As the race went on, we mastered 'going' and washing while the boat was still moving, holding onto the side, which kept the boat speed up.

By this time we'd entered what I would describe as the middle part of the race, weeks 4 and 5. These were hot and uneventful. The sea was calm, the days were filled with blazing sunshine, which meant of course that we had to pump even more water, which was becoming a nightmare. Arguments (which, from what I'm told, always occur on small boats with a crew of four) started, as some were pumping less water than others which, in my case, created a lot of anger and set me in a rage against those who seemed to be doing less.

Some of that angry desalinator pumping…

These arguments would happen every few days, which given the circumstance of our predicament were completely understandable. The sun gets to you out there. Some days the Pacific (after all its fury at the beginning of the race, while we were in the north) became nothing more than a dead lake, a hot, humid, still piece of endless salt water. We had to row through this hour on hour and it was becoming hellish. No clouds, no shade, we longed for the freezing cabins we had in the North Pacific. The cabins by this stage were saunas, though at least in these calm waters we could leave the hatches open. We had electric fans, though like everything

else the salt soon corroded the metal and ate away at them - salty air kills everything including, it seemed, our skin. I was by this time peeling everywhere. I had boils all over my backside (I still have the scars everywhere) and cuts did not heal. The old fishwives tale that the sea heals is just that……. a tale, it makes healing near impossible, you slowly get eaten away without fresh water to bath in (a luxury we didn't have due to our broken electric water maker).

The only thing that got me through that hellish period was the electronic navigation, which at last showed we had under 1,000 miles to our destination. I'd watch it as I rowed, ticking off the miles. Some days we'd reach 3.5 knots and they ticked off well, at other times only 1.8 knots due to slow water which was terribly depressing. We thought the journey would take around 30 days but, as 30 days came and went, we realized just how long this journey was. Still the miles ticked over and over, which gave us hope. Nights became our refuge when we could really lay the power on, and we rowed hard due to the cooler temperature - and this was working, by this time we were 180 nautical miles ahead of the second placed crew. We were half dead and running on fumes, but when you're ahead it's easy to stay ahead, you just keep on going, and winning became an obsession.

As the miles counted down and we reached 500 miles to go, signs of fatigue not only showed on the crew but also on the boat. We had been changing wheels on the sliding seats with all too great regularity, and they were running out. We were down to our final two wheels when we made the decision to fix the bow seat in a non-moving position - so he who rowed bow, rowed arms only and steered (the steering is operated from the bowman's right foot as in a coxless racing boat, a line from the foot plate runs to the rudder), and he who rowed stroke laid on the power. This lasted for a few days, Craig and I rowed stroke, Junho and Andrei bow. Junho had become an expert steerer, which is vital to speed; you can have powerful guys but if they are zig-zagging an ocean it's a waste, and my steering was not so good. We were losing some ground on the second-placed team and I had my doubts. 180 miles (in the lead) became 150, 140 , 130……. they were catching us. We really hurt ourselves during those days, put in everything just to keep the lead until, two days later, the worst happened…… the stroke seat stopped working, and we had no more wheels. We had 300 miles to go and we had to do these miles all arms and back only. I seriously considered the race as being over for us. We could have called for a support boat (which would have disqualified us) for more wheels, but they were over a week away. Could we still win? It seemed improbable. If you look at the human anatomy, the thigh muscles are by far the largest, and to push with a sliding seat you have this muscle in use.

With a non-sliding seat (skiff rowing) you are using your arms and thus far less strength. The only thing we could do was to up the rating from about 20 strokes per minute to 40 or 50, and to put into place a more brutal timetable of one hour on and one hour off 24/7, which meant you never slept more than about 45 minutes. We did this and were only losing a few miles a day. They had 120 to catch and needed at least 15-20 a day on us if they were to catch us. One day they made 20, which scared us; we had hit some real dead water and we made only 40 miles all day (our worst day so far). This created tension in the boat, lots of arguments about water, power etc etc. However the next day things sped up, suddenly we were doing nearly 4 knots! How this was possible on arms alone we don't know, but it raised the mood. We had hit very fast water, plus it was cloudy so we weren't drained by the sun, and the conditions were perfect.

The sea started to rise, the swell increased (we were doing 2 knots when we weren't even rowing), and by nightfall we realized this was more than just cloudy skies as the rain started, and started like I have never seen rain or am likely to. Little known to us (our sat phone had run out of credit) we were in the middle of tropical storm Wali. It rained just ridiculously for 12 straight hours, so much so that when rowing we could barely see each other (we were only feet apart). The wind howled and the rain actually hurt at times, it was so strong and so abundant, and the lightning lit us up like electrical beings - so much so that we were nearly blinded by lightning in the pitch black, which actually hurts the eyes, and the thunder sounded like it was in our ears, we never got used to it, it was just madness. One good thing was the fresh water; it cleaned our wounds away - it's amazing how quickly a fresh shower will clean and cure salt wounds. Our backsides felt better, the cuts and bruises on our legs (from the oars smashing them in big swells) started to heal, and we were clean and salt-free! The next day the race organizers had put credit on our phone and, as the wettest and most insane night of my life ended, we found out we had made up more miles than the other second-placed crew. We were now 140 miles in front with only 200 miles to go, and again, it was ours to lose. The fast seas continued and we continued to row hard. Day 40 came and went as the sun came back, and with it the tropical heat came back to hurt us. Morale was high now though. We were near the end of it all. Cravings started as we could smell the finish. We had, by this time, run out of protein bars and we were craving sugar, sweet things, any kind of taste. For me it was drinks, juices, fruits……. anything real, fresh.

As we rowed into day 41 we kept checking our speed, trying to predict when we'd arrive, surmising on what we'd eat and drink. I'd also made some new rules to my life, less time on my mobile, less time on my

computer looking at junk for no reason, such as Facebook, Twitter etc. More time doing 'real' things, we were all making these new resolutions. We were still rowing arms only and it hurt, but in a good way, the pain was real and meaningful, we were winning the race and winning against ourselves, we could do it. Sleeping was becoming difficult now, as the storm had soaked our cabin and water was just everywhere, plus the cabins were really starting to stink. We desperately wanted to reach Waikiki and the finish line, and excitement also stopped us sleeping. On the satellite navigation map, we were getting very close to the finish, rowing close to Maui and Molokai when, at around lunch time on day 42 we saw land - this I will never forget.

Tantalisingly near the finish – me and Junho

After 42 days in a tiny boat, to see land is about as big a high as you could get. The huge mountain of Maui looked foreboding, I felt like those seamen of old seeing an unknown land and imagining what and who was on this land, this tropical paradise. Our joy didn't last long, as our emergency water maker suddenly broke, and we had no fresh water. We had fresh water in our ballast, but knew if we used too much of it we were out of the race, disqualified. We rather stupidly decided not to drink that night. Dehydration is a strange beast. We were pretty dehydrated anyway, so any less was really hurting us. By this stage in the race we were barely urinating, and what we were was a sort of milky dense residue, almost nothing was coming out, as we urinated at best once, maybe twice a day for a few seconds.

We went through the night and the thirst grew and grew. We argued over the few drops we had left. We craved water, imagined waterfalls,

swimming pools…… anything with fresh water, but still we rowed on. This also meant we couldn't eat, as we needed water to hydrate the food. As morning came, and another hot day approached, we knew we couldn't continue this, so we called race headquarters. We were informed that we would get a time penalty but, as we were now two days ahead of the second-placed crew, it wouldn't matter, as we would only get a 12 hour penalty and the record would not be affected. The Guinness book of world records only stipulates that you get no outside help during the row and that you have no physical contact with anybody else, but the Great Pacific Race has stricter rules. The rules checked, we were then were able to drink, and it was the greatest drink of our lives. We glugged and glugged water and inevitably felt rather sick due to the shock to our systems. The sun came up and we felt stronger, we were now hours away from the finish and could see Oahu fairly clearly. The excitement was immense, we'd been at sea for 43 days and at last it was nearly over, at last dry land beckoned.

The island went from being a grey mountain in the distance, to a land full of colour as we got closer, until we were rowing with it by our side. We were rowing pretty fast now, as is common in Ocean rowing towards the end of a voyage - excitement drives you on. The finish-line was slightly further than we thought, but at last we approached Diamond Head, a beautiful old volcanic crater near Waikiki. At 12:30pm, local time, we crossed the finish-line. After 43 days, 5 hours and 30 minutes we'd rowed the 2,400 miles from California to Hawaii.

Crossing the finish-line: L to R: Junho, Andre, me, Craig.

We arrived at The Waikiki Yacht Club, meeting girlfriends and family and, leaving the boat, we had to adjust to land- and ship-lag. You just cannot balance on dry land, and you walk as if drunk. I was surprised at how hard it was and how long it lasted (two days). We were also pretty out of it mentally, the tiredness had taken hold. After a meeting with the doctor, I was released (some had varying degrees of problems and required further attention, draining of infections, antibiotics etc.) and then I was finally off to a hotel bed.

The Winners. L to R: Craig, Me, Junho, Andre.

I'm not sure I'd ever do it again, but it was one of the greatest experiences of my life. We'd won!, and we had recorded the fastest crossing in a row boat to Hawaii and now held the Guinness world record. We were, in the end, given a time penalty of 12 hours for drinking our ballast water, and a further 24 hours for losing our Epirb (emergency distress beacon, which got knocked off the boat when one of us fell on it in a storm). Luckily, we had beaten the next crew by over two days, so this still meant we had won The Great Pacific Race, and anyway it hadn't affected the Guinness world record.

The recovery from an event like this is fairly lengthy, and I'm still pretty sore from the salt and pressure wounds. You lose muscle in certain areas from sitting down all the time, plus bone density comes right down. You're

pretty weak for a while as your kidneys and muscles repair, but it's worth the after-effects. Putting the weight back on is one of the good side effects, having lost about two stone I can eat whatever I want! None of us will forget the experiences we had at sea, and it has without a doubt made me a stronger person.

Craig, me, Junho and Andre with the Race Committee a bit soon after arriving at Waikiki!