

PUSHING THE LIMITS



Ben Pritchard representing Wales at the 2017 Home International Regatta

PHOTO: DAN PRITCHARD / PFC DESIGNS PHOTOGRAPHY

Ben Pritchard was working his way up the domestic cycling rankings when he suffered a devastating spinal injury in a racing crash. Little more than 20 months later, in May 2018, he made his debut with the GB Para-rowing squad at the Gavirate International Regatta on Lake Varese, Italy. He reflects on his journey here

BY CAROLINE ROBERTS

Gavirate was a big milestone for me. I was looking forward to going out and seeing where I placed in the grand scheme of things and I was over the moon to reach both A finals, when I was expecting a B or C final. I was fifth on Saturday with a personal best and sixth on Sunday with another personal best. Obviously, because I'm a competitor by nature, it's never quite good enough. You always have to strive for more.

Prior to that, I'd only done three races at full speed: Peterborough Spring Regatta, the Home International Regatta, where I represented Wales, and the GB trials. At Gavirate, I did four back-to-back races in three days so that was an experience. I learnt to measure my efforts and not always go off hell for leather in the very first race, as the next race in four hours' time is probably more important.

It was nerve-racking; especially when I saw the first heat draw because I had Paralympic gold medallist Roman Polianskyi in the lane next to me. Knowing what I'm like, a 26-year-old testosterone-filled male, I knew that I'd just want to race him and I'd blow it. Tom [Dyson, Lead Coach, Paralympic Pathway] says you have to be like a horse drawing a carriage, with your blinkers on. You know he's going to row through you but you just keep looking down your lane and focusing on your own race.

After my accident, I was in Stoke Mandeville Hospital for three months and they have a weekly fitness session, with the Para-rowing talent and development coaches visiting every couple of weeks. The first time I tried rowing, I hated it as just sitting on the erg watching the numbers was really

boring. But when my friend Jon Cook, who was in hospital at the same time, pointed out that there was a leader board, the competitive drive kicked in. I think I'm still number three on that board, and the two people above me can both walk, so I'm very happy with that. I owe Jon a lot.

I then got invited to Caversham for trials and it was very embarrassing as I'd never even sat in a boat before. The senior squad rowers with gold medals were going up and down and I was there tied to the pontoon being taught the basics.

After hospital, I spent three months in Swansea with my family trying to get used to being in a wheelchair and looking for somewhere

Finding an adaptive boat at a club is very difficult, so, initially, I'd have to go to Caversham and use theirs. But now I've bought Tom Aggar's training boat with part-funding from Disability Sport Wales and Welsh Rowing. Will rowing in it give me an extra edge? I don't believe in that kind of stuff. I think it's all down to the effort you put in yourself, but it's obviously cool to say you're rowing in Tom Aggar's boat. He's a real champion for Parasport.

The 10-day training camp in Varese was my first real insight into what it takes to be a full-time athlete. It was just incredible to wake up every day and think: I'm going rowing now. And going out with people like Andy [Houghton] and Laurence [Whiteley]

was amazing. Laurence has a Paralympic gold medal and Andy's fourth in the world [2017 Worlds] so you're picking up good training and recovery habits from those guys. I was very humbled and

honoured to take part in that.

Next year, the plan is to get one of the World Cups under my belt. And the long-term aim is the 2024 Paralympics. We're trying to build up to that, rather than doing everything at 100mph and then burning out.

Working full time and essentially rowing full time, you have to sacrifice a lot. I've missed out on things like my best mate's stag do, social gatherings and family holidays. I have a page in my diary where I write all the things I've missed, my 'Sacrifice List', and then I try to do something to make up for them in my three weeks' downtime. It really helps that my family and friends are on board with that.

My employer has been really supportive with the flexible working on a Monday and Friday and, even →

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accessible to live in London so I could get back to my job at RKH Specialty Insurance. Then we had to find a club, which was difficult as the Tideway means that access is an issue and the lack of water time was really affecting my development.


But now I'm working in central London from Tuesday to Thursday, I do my ergs on my balcony and go to the gym thanks to support from the GLL Sport Foundation; they give me access to their gyms around the country and provided funding for the erg. On Monday and Friday afternoons, I work remotely so I can train in the morning. On Mondays, I join the Para squad at Bisham Abbey and then, from Friday to Sunday, I'm looked after by Adam Berry, boathouse manager and senior men's coach at Twickenham RC.

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when I was out in Italy, they let me work remotely, so I didn't have to take two weeks of my precious annual leave. And British Rowing has been understanding when I've had to miss training for work meetings. It's not all about you, it's about all those people who are around you, supporting you. I just have to try not to let them down!

A lot of the other sports I've tried involve you leaving your day chair for another type of wheelchair, but it's different with rowing. You leave your wheelchair behind and then you're floating on the water so you don't feel disabled, you feel free.

With cycling, I'd spent a long time learning my craft, watching races on TV and studying the history of the sport. Cycling was my passion, and it still is. But now I'm becoming a rower, it's all-encompassing. I'm watching rowing, talking about rowing with my friends, looking at what I can buy for my boat, watching videos on technique – it's never-ending.

When I was cycling, I remember getting to the top of a tough hill climb in Sheffield and it was the first time I'd ever had that taste of iron in my throat. My teammates said it's your lungs bleeding a bit from the effort, although I'm not sure about the science of that! Now, I get that feeling from rowing. It's about knowing that you've pushed yourself to your upper limits. It's a deep, dark place, and your mind says you can't go there, but your body still does. I love it. 


Ben Pritchard is part of the British Rowing Para-rowing Development Programme. The Para-rowing coaches are actively looking for new people to join the programme as they look to the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics and beyond. Read more on page 30... 

PHOTO: STUART CLARKE



Above: Ben Pritchard in GB kit

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