

# No Mercie

Any aspirations I had of achieving a World Series ranking were fading fast as I dragged myself up the steeply sloping sand of La Mercie Beach having spectacularly failed to negotiate its crushing shore break attempting to reach the start of the Durban Downwind surfski race.

Ten eventful minutes earlier I had been listening attentively to Barry Lewin's final briefing whilst snatching nervous glances over his not inconsiderable shoulders at the rank upon rank of crashing, tumbling breakers that I knew that would have to paddle through before I could even think about racing.

Brought up in England now living in Hong Kong I only took up surf ski paddling 5 years ago and consequently have never had the opportunity to experience a shore break of this magnitude before. However I was not ignorant of the gravity of what I was about to attempt as I had read about the 26 boats broken on this beach during the 2013 South African championships. It embarrassed me to recall thinking at the time, that to damage so many boats must have involved some carelessness but observing the conditions confronting me today it was glaringly apparent that carelessness had nothing to do with it. This was survival, pure and simple and the boat came second.

Inexperienced I might have been but not totally unprepared having been fortunate enough to

be tutored in the essential skills needed for paddling in the surf by the incomparable Mocke brothers; undo your leash, pick your set, go hard, attack the wave and don't hang around in the impact zone, but the waves facing me today were bigger, much bigger than I had ever contemplated paddling through before.

The whole experience might have been entirely different as my first attempt was going really well until I reached the final wave before the back-line. I had picked a spot where the waves seemed a bit smaller and after a couple of deep breaths I had mounted my ski and pulled hard for the first wave. Within a few strokes I had punched through the first few foamies and was feeling strong when I had this ominous feeling that the water was being sucked from under me and as I looked up I saw it; it was huge. Now if you are lucky and have timed the sets correctly the final wave will be smaller than average and as smaller waves break closer to shore the impact zone shrinks to a manageable distance. If you are unlucky or if, as in my case, you are not experienced in reading the sets, the final wave can become a wall of water the size of a house and being bigger it breaks further out, broadening the impact zone to an impossible distance leaving you with no plan B. In my brief paddling career I have learnt that the best, and probably only, option in these circumstances is to continue with plan A, paddle as hard as you can while praying. If you are lucky you reach the wave just before it breaks and discounting a bit of 'air-time' it can pass harmlessly under you and you realise you have made it. Unfortunately

this was not one of those occasions and I clearly recall a moment catching a glimpse of the bow of my boat as it pointed directly skywards as if preparing itself for a missile launch as my world transformed itself into a swirling mass of water, foam and sand. Experiencing the forces present within a large wave for the first time is interesting to say the least. They are so great, so irresistible they are surprising more than terrifying, vigorous more than painful. The ski, while you remain in contact with it, transforms itself from a smooth sliver of carbon and glass-fibre into a thrashing, gyrating lethal weapon, bent on inflicting bodily harm while the paddle you were hanging onto as if your life depended on it is plucked from your grasp in a second. Under water, relieved of the responsibility of paddle and ski only one issue remained and that was to find the surface. Usually this does not present too much of a challenge but when being tumbled about inside the equivalent of a giant washing machine its whereabouts are not quite so obvious. Important never-the-less, for as you tumble you become aware that not finding it within a reasonable period of time is generally associated with some rather unpleasant consequences. Gradually the spin cycle subsided and the buoyancy provided by the mandatory life jacket popped me to the surface where a reviving gulp of air relieved the burning in my chest that was beginning to become a serious concern. Pleased to be able to see the sky again my problems were not entirely over as I was now 75 meters from the beach facing a strong under-tow with waves breaking on my head every 13 seconds and it

took me a good 5 minutes of hard swimming to make the shore. On the way I managed to retrieve my paddle and a helpful lifesaver reunited me with my ski and in a voice that sounded a bit too anxious for my liking asked me if I wanted to try again, "your decision" he said.

Trying to sound more confident than I felt I replied that of course I was trying again and after a minute or two I had recovered sufficiently to make a second attempt. This time I fared even worse, coming off my ski within a few metres, which at least spared me a second spin in the washing machine.

Sitting dejectedly on the sand, struggling to come to terms with the frankly unfamiliar feeling of complete failure, a rather odd thing happened: looking up I had a vision that Hank McGregor was standing over me, he was reaching out his hand towards me and seemed to be asking me for my paddle. "You have come a long way" said the vision, "it would be a pity if you didn't race." Having met Hank only a couple of times previously, the latest being the previous week at the Mauritius Ocean Classic, I was initially rather awestruck and confused as to his intentions but these became clearer as he went on to explain that he was offering to paddle my boat to the back line and I was to take the safety boat out and meet him there. Meekly I handed over my paddle and without further ado Hank stripped off his shirt, picked up my ski and was gone. Scanning the beach I immediately spotted an uncompromising looking character sporting a bright yellow jacket with radio in one hand and

a pair of binoculars in the other. Presuming, correctly, that he was the safety officer I explained the plan as succinctly as I could and without comment he turned and barked a couple of orders into his radio. Within seconds a bright orange rubber duck, piloted by two ridiculously young lifesavers, came careering towards us through the surf. I didn't have time to consider whether Hank's proposal was a sensible one I just knew that it was the only way I had of keeping my dream alive and energised by the indomitable spirit of those around me I launched myself once more into the surf.

With consummate skill my guardian angels manoeuvred their boat around me in the shallows waiting for exactly the right moment to pounce. "Now" they yelled in unison and as the boat closed in I lunged for it and felt two powerful hands grab hold of my harness and haul me over the side. Flapping around on the deck like a gaffed fish I struggled to stay in the boat as we charged off at full throttle, engaged in a crazy game of 'Chicken' with the waves. Zig zagging this way and that out through the white water we went until suddenly there was quiet and the blue of the ocean and Hank sitting calmly astride my ski waiting for us. I manage to blurt out a quick "Thanks Hank," hardly adequate considering what he had just done but further conversation was cut short as the hooter sounded for the start of the race. I have no idea how Hank got back to shore that day but if someone had told me later that they had seen him walking on the water, I would have believed them.

Almost missing the start put me at the back of the pack but at least I was racing and soon my paddling settled into a recovery rhythm while I caught my breath and for the first time in a while was in a position to take stock of my situation. A damage assessment was my first priority as I hadn't emerged entirely unscathed from my pounding. My juice bag was gone so there was not going to be any fluids for the next 2 hours; not great but not terminal. My hat was missing but conditions were overcast; hot but manageable. I was tired but was actually feeling surprisingly good and although I realised my time would be slow, the conditions were well within my capability and I reasoned that all I had to do was keep going for 26 kms and I would finish.

Within a few minutes I became aware that for some peculiar reason my leg-length had become too short, something I thought odd because the boat I was paddling was the same one I had paddled for 10 days in Mauritius and I had carefully noted my footplate settings at the time. It didn't take me long to work out that the cause of the problem was an accumulation of a large amount of sand in my booties, deposited there during my tumble in the surf. I was debating whether would be better to stop and take off my booties and empty them or whether it would be quicker to adjust my footplate when Barry Lewin appeared alongside on his jet ski to enquire as to my wellbeing. I told him I was fine but my footplate needed moving. No problem for the race director who jumps into the water and within seconds adjusts the footplate before jumping back on his jet ski and heading off to check on

the rest of his flock not without first giving me precise directions as to where I should be headed.

For the next two hours as I paddled to complete the race rather than compete in it, I found my mind wandering, reflecting on what for me has been a most remarkable journey since I first sat on a surfski and wobbled a couple of hundred metres across Tai Tam Bay in Hong Kong. I have been incredibly fortunate that since that first outing the world of Surf ski has had a positive affect on the physical, social, emotional and spiritual aspects of my life. It has helped create a tremendous sense of wellbeing that has developed into a passion which I feel will be one of the defining features of the rest of my life.

I had always enjoyed keeping fit but a litany of old rugby injuries had made it impossible for me to partake in even the gentlest exercise without experiencing debilitating pain. With surfski however, once I had mastered the basic stroke, I found that I could paddle to my maximum effort for extended periods without any adverse reaction. As I became fitter I gradually increased the frequency and duration of my paddles until I was spending one to two hours on the water each day.

Fuelling this amount of exercise meant that I had to pay attention to my diet in order that I would have the energy I needed. During the process I felt my metabolism change as I started craving fatty foods and protein and avoiding carbohydrates and sweets. My body weight dropped 10% stabilising at 90kgs but stronger, especially around my core. As the

best time for me to paddle is the early morning I needed more and better quality sleep so I started drinking less or no alcohol in the evenings and going to bed earlier. In order to achieve the optimum paddling position I started stretching, a routine that has now become a daily ritual of greeting-the-sun. I have lost count of the number of inquisitive people who have approached me on the beach to enquire about this curious object which isn't a surfboard and isn't a canoe. After encouraging them to have a go several have bought skis and have become keen paddlers themselves.

I have been on two 'Trips Of A Lifetime' (which my wife says is nonsensical) exploring the wild west coast of Australia from Perth to Carnarvon with Dean Gardiner and Oscar Chalupski; I have rounded 5 iconic South African Capes from east to west and west to east with Jasper and Dawid Mocke, exploring the limits and emerging unscathed, bonded by common experience.

I have taken part in World Series races in Hong Kong, Mauritius and South Africa and later this year I intend to travel to Perth to add 'The Doctor' to my inventory. One of the most enjoyable aspects of these events is the opportunity to socialise and, after a fashion, race against the best open ocean paddlers in the world.

A vital ingredient of wellbeing is being able to find one's element, somewhere or something where one is happy and relaxed, participating in an activity that one likes and is good at.

Ever since I learnt to swim I have felt at home in the water. I love the freedom it gives me, its

ability to eliminate gravity and its capacity to transport me geographically and spiritually. When I paddle I recall how I felt when I was a boy and I would get on my bike and just ride wherever the feeling took me. Now I get on my ski and taking note of tides and wind and currents I just paddle and while I paddle I notice my senses awaken, I taste and smell the sea. I see fish jumping and occasionally a dolphin and I see the colours of the rocks not hidden by concrete and asphalt. I hear the birds calling as they wheel around the cliffs and I feel the ripple of the water as my ski cuts through the surface. I have learnt to look at the sky to see what the clouds are doing and observe the water to explain what I see. Even when not on the water when I hear the rustle of the leaves on the trees my pulse quickens at the prospect of sneaking out for a paddle before being called home for tea.

Open ocean paddling is an extreme sport and there have been moments when the conditions have been such that my primary emotion has been one of terror. Having said that, with good instruction and attention to safety the risks can be minimised but I think the adrenaline aspect of surfski only partly explains why paddlers experience withdrawal symptoms when denied their daily or weekly fix. I am inclining to the view that the fear aspect of paddling may be responsible for a growing spiritual awareness in me, a concept summed up in the observation that 'there are no atheists in a foxhole', but I tend to think that it is not fear that has planted this seed but a growing sense that this is something I was meant to do.

Consequently I feel calmer and worry less and wonder whether this is what is meant by Devine providence.

My attention snaps back to the present as I notice the cranes of Durban harbour are getting pretty close and the nagging concern that had been at the back of my mind for sometime crystallises itself into the realisation that I have no idea where the finish is or what it looks like. Hosted the previous evening by the wonderfully generous but ultra laid back, Matt Bouman who has paddled this stretch of coast all of his life, it was deemed 'unnecessary' for us to attend the pre-race briefing and that we should go for a paddle instead. Unnecessary for him maybe but very important for me. However I reasoned that if I had not seen the finish by the time I reached the harbour I could go in there and be safe. So I paddled on and as I passed the 2 hour mark I moved closer to shore and within a few minutes spotted my guardian angels in their bright orange boat pointing out the finish to me. I managed to catch a small wave to the beach and as waded the last few metres through the shallows Barry Lewin came down to meet me, arm outstretched, with a huge smile on his face and shook me firmly by the hand. He congratulated me on finishing and as he did so I felt another wave break over me but this time one of gratitude. It takes a high quality people to shoulder the responsibility of organising these events and without the likes of Barry around they just would not take place.

At the prize giving that evening I was honoured to be named Durban Downwind Swimming Champion 2015 and hope that my few words of acceptance conveyed how happy I was to be part of this community. Even my cap, lost in the surf at La Mercie, was returned to me and they had taken the trouble to dry it.

My intention is to return for next year's race but hopefully not to defend my title.

Acknowledging that this year it was richly deserved, it is not one I wish to win again.