

Short History of the Anglo-American Boat Race: The Story So Far

Long before the Anglo-American Boat Race was conceived, or even American independence secured, names famous on the local rivers of England, settled in the United States and with them took over their native predilections for the English style of rowing.

The concept of an Anglo-American Boat Race originated in 1872 after earlier ad-hoc contests which had occurred between rowing competitors from America and England. These early matches included a meeting in 1866 between Kelley from Newcastle (England) and Hamill of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (USA). Following this, in August 1869, there was a glorious meeting between Oxford and Harvard drawing the biggest crowd ever seen for a boat race up to date. Oxford this time got the better of its American cousins. In 1870, an Englishman named Renforth and his English crew crossed the Atlantic to compete against American teams that year and the following year. However the organization of these events did not ever get as far as a formalised annual boat race.

As such, it was from these bonds of transatlantic kinship and early matches that the idea of the Anglo-American Boat Race originated in 1872 by members of the American WASP Establishment when the Atalanta Rowing Club of New York posted a challenge in 1872 to the London Rowing Club to row a four-oared race on the Thames. The gauntlet was thus thrown down by the Americans who not unreasonably wished to avenge the defeat of Harvard by Oxford and given the huge popularity in Anglo-American rivalry establish a formal transatlantic Boat Race competition. The challenge was accepted by the London Rowing Club for June 1872 and so the Anglo-American Boat Race was born.

The inaugural race was one of great expectations. Advertising of the Anglo-American Boat Race in the press captivated both the British and American public. Four of the greatest American gentlemen - Edward Smith, Theodore Van Raden, James O'Neill and Russell Withers, along with three extras Laurence Waterbury, Andrew Handy and Humphry Leroy were chosen to represent the Atalanta Rowing Club of New York leaving on the transatlantic steamer, the City of Brooklyn. The American team arrived after a very rough crossing in Liverpool, England, 12 days after setting sail from New York and seemed in good spirits. The seven American gentlemen then moved south and head-quartered themselves at the Fox and Hounds Hotel in Putney.

The London four chosen to represent the London Rowing Club were Gulston, Ryan, Stout and Long - with Routh and Smith to fall back upon.

Little was known in England of the Atalanta crew, but England was certain that of late their American cousins across the water had been turning serious cultivation and

improvement of rowing as an athletic exercise. At American regattas the four men Edward Smith, Theodore Van Raden, James O'Neill and Russell Withers were the pre-eminent team and almost always carried off pretty much every American prize. The Atalanta Rowing Club of New York was located on the Hudson River, at the Elysian Fields, Hoboken and founded in 1848, eight years prior to the London Rowing Club. The founding members of Atalanta Rowing Club were Charlton, Armstrong, Livingston, Carlisle, Cameron, Bailey, Thompson, Graham, Dunlap and Aulger. With both the London and New York clubs, all but a small minority of members were men of the establishment, gentlemen of leisure or businessmen working in the City and on Wall Street.

The Americans took a while to learn the course and found the 16 feet rise and fall of the tide on the Thames very puzzling. With home advantage, the early competitions held in England were overwhelmingly won by the British crew, however the Americans more than held their own on their side of the Atlantic.

The Anglo-American Boat Race Series was still one of the most important Boat Races of the Season until out-break of World War II when the race was not continued and it simply disappeared.

21st Century

Anglo-American Boat Race: GB Row Challenge

The Anglo-American Boat Club Ltd was set up with the sole objective to re-establish the Anglo-American Boat Race as one of the world's most prestigious and exciting rowing competitions, presenting a race that captivated the American and British imagination of hardship, skill and determination by rowing unsupported around the UK, and latterly the East or West coast of the USA.

2005 – GB Row Challenge

Led by Lt William de Laszlo, 25, of London, 4 intrepid oarsmen left London's Tower Bridge on Tuesday 7th June on their 2000 mile trip circumnavigating Great Britain. Lt de Laszlo and two of his companions, Lt Ben Jesty, 24, of London, and Sgt James Bastin, 34, of Dursley, Gloucs, were Grenadier Guards based in Windsor. The crew braved force eight gales and 30ft waves in the Irish Sea.

Arriving back at Tower Bridge the 4 man crew completed the 2000 mile journey in 26 days 21 hours 14 minutes to earn their place in the Guinness World Records Book.

2009 – GB Row

Due to the light aircraft crashing into the Irish Sea and the subsequent involvement of the crew of GB Row aboard British Orchid, the crew decided to postpone their attempt to row around GB. Their challenge was subsequently cancelled.

2010 – VIRGIN GB Row 2010

The story continued in the new format Anglo-American Boat Race: GB Row Challenge, sponsored personally by Sir Richard Branson (called VIRGIN GB Row

2010). Four boats entered but only 2 managed to reach the start line. After an intriguing cat and mouse struggle along the South coast, the 4 ladies (Seagals in Go Commando) led by 80 miles with the 4 man crew (Misfits in Orca) stuck off Torquay. The male crew then caught the girls at Lands End in very challenging weather conditions. The boys tried to push home their advantage but were swept out to sea and anchored in shipping lanes close to Wolf Rock. They retired 40 hours later, unable to make headway in strong currents and high winds and unable to clear their fouled anchor, holding rigid on the rocky seabed below.

The race was effectively over, leaving the Seagals to push-on alone and developing a new challenge – beat the elements and complete the challenge to set a new World Record.

The Seagals adopted a policy of coast hugging to minimise the effect of the unseasonal weather and finished the race in just over 50 days at sea. They created a New World record, verified by Guinness as the first all-female crew to complete this gruelling event. As they rowed victoriously up the Thames, their elation hid the difficulties encountered, including running out of rations late on, close encounters with car ferries and fishing boats, rowing through live firing ranges, being stalked by a killer whale and flood damage to their onboard electrical circuits..... and just being on the water 24/7 for over 50 days amidst some longest periods of unseasonal June weather seen around the UK for over 40 years, all with absolutely no external support whatever.

2011 – VIRGIN GB Row 2011

The event was planned and prepared as for the 2010 challenge but was cancelled less than 2 months before the start date as all four entries ran up against financial and timeline constraints that would have prevented them being fully prepared for this arduous and ultra- open- water rowing event.

2012 - Anglo-American Boat Race

It was agreed not to hold the event in 2012 due to London Olympics. However, it was unanimously agreed to run the event in the UK once every 2 years in future, with a view to staging the event in USA in the intervening years. The next event will be GB Row 2013, to start on 1st June.

2013 – The Anglo American Boat Race: GB Row 2013

GB Row 2013 was approved to run (AABC Ltd Strategy meeting Sep 11), with a common start date of 1st June – Saturday. With strong interest already from 6 potential crews (mixed crew, a pair, a revolutionary new build, several 4 man teams and the probability of the first six man crew) – new Guinness World Records are up for grabs to finishers.

It should be quite a race.