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Rio 2016 Olympics: Work of support staff to push Team GB towards rowing gold a brutal business

Team GB are predicted to win 6-8 medals in rowing at the Rio 2016 Olympics CREDIT: EPA

By **Oliver Brown**, CHIEF SPORTS FEATURE WRITER, RIO DE JANEIRO

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It is safe to say Sally Brown did not grow up dreaming of a job with British Rowing. A physiotherapist whose only exposure to elite sport had come through rugby, including a stint at London Irish, she approached the prospect of working among this famously obsessive breed with a certain trepidation. "I had next to no knowledge of what it would be like," she says. "The night before my interview, I went on Wikipedia to try to find out."

There could be no handy précis that prepared her for what lay ahead. The most famous single quote in rowing – Sir Steve Redgrave's breathless outburst in Atlanta that "if anybody sees me in a boat again, shoot me" – **barely scratches the surface of the sacrifice required.**

Sally Brown CREDIT: INVISUALS

Heard about the training camp in Silvretta, Austria, where altitude-starved rowers power through their sessions next to snowmobiles in primitive garages?

Or how about the winter equivalent in Spain? This is a delightful one, where the routine for 10 consecutive days runs roughly as follows: wake up, go full 'beast mode' on the ergometer, collapse, throw up, repeat. It is a brutalising business, where the quest for three, perhaps four gold medals this week on the placid waters of Rio's Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas must be plotted in painstaking detail.

Team GB's performance director of 20 years: Sir David Tanner CREDIT: PA

Sir David Tanner, the British team's performance director for 20 years, has a disciplinarian streak befitting a former headmaster of a large south-west London comprehensive. Plus, he chooses his support staff meticulously.

Just as Katherine Grainger, darling of London 2012, was dropped this year from the Rio squad with a distinct absence of sentiment, there is nobody behind the scenes at British Rowing's Caversham headquarters who would survive long without satisfying Tanner's fearsomely high standards. **Everything in rowing takes place at the ragged edge of human endurance**.

At Olympic level, the central question is how to manage that precarious area so that rowers – not disposed to having a psychological 'stop' button – push themselves intensely, but not so much that they injure themselves and become of no use to man or beast. It is a balancing act that Mark Homer, the resident physiologist, is accustomed to conducting.

"All our athletes tread that line between performing well and breaking down," Homer says. "You have to push them. We need a huge bank of data, whether from the ergometer, the water, or the gym, to make sure we get the most out of them. On the ergo, for example, we'll take blood lactate samples. We know what the responses should be, because we have built up so much information that we can say: 'He's a bit overcooked today, let's back off tomorrow'. The key to success in a volume-based programme is knowing when to go hard and when to go steady."

There is a partnership between British Rowing and SAS, an American analytics company, which helps establish physiological profiles of the rowers with forensic precision. What seems a straightforward enterprise of thrashing along a two-kilometre-long lake for seven minutes or less becomes almost a separate science in the hands of the numbers gurus. Jack Mercer, the biomechanics expert, has equipped each British boat with a plethora of sensors in an effort to work out how a single stroke of the oar can be made more efficient.

"We're looking at the force a rower brings down upon the water, and the acceleration of the boat," he explains. "A race that is 2,000 metres long typically involves around 200 strokes. As such, the tiniest change on a certain stroke, multiplied 200 times, can become very significant."

Lagoa Stadium | Rowing, canoe sprint

REUTERS/EDGARD GARRIDO

Capacity: 14,000

The Rodrigo de Freitas lagoon, which is connected to the Atlantic Ocean, is overlooked by the giant Christ the Redeemer statue, a suitably impressive venue for one of the Olympics' most celebrated events. Lanes and finishing towers have been installed, although concerns over the cleanliness of the water remain; test events this year saw several competitors suffer stomach problems shortly after racing.

Some trivia for you: the lagoon's nickname is the affectionate 'The Heart of Rio de Janeiro' and its total surface area is 2.4 million square meters.

One perpetual challenge is how to sate the appetites of athletes who will typically have completed a double training stint by the time the average worker considers a midmorning coffee. The fuel intake is gargantuan: 5,000 calories a day for the men's openweight crews, rising to 6,000 in the lead-up to a major competition. It falls to Wendy Martinson, the team nutritionist, to cater for such demands when most hotels, including the British Olympic base in Lagoa, are unused to serving up the volumes necessary. "I always warn them about the amounts that will be consumed," she says. "But I don't think they really believe it until the rowers turn up."

Sometimes, the message is not communicated at all. Take what happened at the World Championships in Chungju, South Korea, in 2013, when best-laid plans foundered due to the language barrier. "It was a big business centre, which we shared with a few other nations, and the same meals were put out every day," Homer recalls. "Wendy had to ask them gently, 'Do you mind mixing it up a bit?' The next day, there were chips for breakfast." Come the Olympics, such misunderstandings do not bear thinking about.

Katherine Grainger (l) was dropped from the Olympic squad with a distinct lack of sentiment CREDIT: EPA

Martinson has refined her daily menus into an art form, especially for the notoriously gannet-like man-mountains among the openweights: two breakfasts in the morning, a platter for lunch laden with red meat, potatoes and pasta – not to mention salad, for all the micronutrients crucial to immune function and recovery – followed by an afternoon snack, dinner, and milk at bedtime for an overnight protein rush. By way of example, Omar Meziane, the team chef, serves up one of his celebrated sausage wraps for me. Even a Great Dane would struggle to finish it.

Few appreciate better how far this set-up has advanced than Dr Ann Redgrave, the chief medical officer for British Rowing for the best part of 25 years and wife, of course, of a certain Sir Steve. She rowed internationally herself, as a member of the women's eight at Los Angeles 1984, and remembers preparations being less than rigorous. "In the Eighties, Steve would just rock up and row," she says. "You almost never came across a doctor unless you were at a race, and that was only because rowers might pass out."

For Rio, the medical guidelines are as stringent as they would be for the slums of Kolkata. Double gold medallist Pete Reed described this week how rowers had been banned from any contact with tap water, even for brushing their teeth, and issued with antiseptic soap of a strength normally reserved for surgeons.

"We are insisting on the most thorough hygiene as soon as they come off the water," Redgrave says. "We have upped the demands, and I think they will be effective." They are not entirely fail-safe, though: Graeme Thomas, a member of the men's quadruple scull, fell ill with a flu-like virus within 24 hours of arriving in Rio. Life at the limit in this camp is not without controversy.

Paul Thompson, the long-time women's coach, became embroiled in June in a bullying row after Emily Taylor, unceremoniously dropped from the women's eight, accused the Australian of creating a "culture of fear". He denies the allegations and an investigation continues.

Emily Taylor accused Paul Thompson of creating a "culture of fear" CREDIT: GETTY IMAGES

Elsewhere, the dedication is palpable. "To get to this point, the rowers have to give up a lot," says Brown, who assumes all physio responsibilities with her colleague, Liz Arnold. "But that's what makes it worthwhile. It's an inspiring and motivating environment to be around."

Even the task of transporting the boats to Lagoa was the product of three years' planning, with containers specifically configured for the 5,600-mile sea journey from Southampton to Rio.

Over the next eight days, we will discover how much of this graft can be brought to fruition to the podium. We can be assured, at least, that few will have worked harder or longer for their rewards. As Arnold puts it, proudly: "Rowing is a very addictive sport. Everyone here has an affinity for it."

A savage enterprise it might be, but among the British contingent it shows no sign of losing its strange power to seduce.