

# Peddie

SPRING/SUMMER  
2018

CHRONICLE



3,000 MILES.

44 DAYS.

SOLO.

## **OLIVER CRANE '17 IS THE YOUNGEST PERSON IN HISTORY TO ROW SOLO ACROSS THE ATLANTIC.**

For Oliver Crane '17, rowing a 23-foot boat across the Atlantic Ocean sounded like the ultimate adventure. It would be an opportunity to test his physical and mental limits and a great way to raise awareness about two causes that he feels passionate about, marine conservation and homelessness.

Crane knew that he would have to grapple with monster 40-foot waves as well as sleep deprivation, hunger, salt sores and seasickness.

And he knew that he would face extraordinary loneliness. Day by day. Hour by hour. Minute by minute he would be alone with his thoughts in the middle of a vast ocean. Hundreds of miles from another human being. Just him, his boat, three months' worth of food and a waste bucket.

Crane secured admission to Princeton University during his senior year at Peddie. But first, he would fulfill a family tradition and

embark on this exciting gap year adventure.

More humans have flown into space and climbed Mount Everest than have rowed across the Atlantic. If Crane completed the “world’s toughest row,” at 19 years old, he would be the youngest person ever to do so.

## A FAMILY TRADITION

It is customary in the Crane family to take on a meaningful project before university. Oliver Crane’s older siblings have all accomplished amazing feats during their gap years. His brother Cason climbed the highest mountain on each continent, his brother David cycled across Africa and his sister, Bella, hiked from Mexico to Canada.

Crane rowed crew at Peddie all four years, so as he contemplated what he would do during his gap year, something related to rowing seemed like a good start. He began researching gap year opportunities midway during his senior year, and when he came across the Talisker Whiskey Atlantic Challenge, he immediately knew it was what he wanted to do.

“I thought the row was the perfect way to test my limits, physically and mentally,” he explained. “And I was drawn to the isolation aspect of it, having to take on these challenges by yourself and do everything on your own ...

once you get out there, you are unsupported. If something goes wrong, it’s up to you to fix it.”

Crane is a firm believer in living life to the extreme. “My mom [Isabella de la Houssaye] who is an ultra-endurance athlete has always fostered that in me,” he said. “Forget the risks. I’m honestly more scared of going through life and having regrets about what I didn’t do.”

## “A DETERMINED YOUNG MAN.”

Crane’s rowing coach at Peddie, Joe Murtaugh, whom he called “the best coach in the world,” was surprised to learn that Crane was preparing for a Trans-Atlantic row. “I’ll state the obvious and say that Oliver is a determined young man,” said Murtaugh. “But he’s also kind and humble.”

Coach Murtaugh called his former student “a grinder” and “low-maintenance.”

“He rarely had a bad day on our team, and he improved consistently, finishing his career at Peddie in a successful first varsity boat.”

Crane’s achievements earned him the Caspersen Crew Award his senior year. The award recognizes a rower who exhibits dedication and commitment and who embodies the spirit of rowing.

Peddie Director of Rowing Barb Grudt, who is also a two-time Olympian in the sport, was amazed to learn of Crane’s gap year plans. “I

Oliver Crane '17 prepares for his Atlantic crossing aboard the Homeward Bound in La Gomera Marina. (Ben Duffy)





Crane rows with the Peddie varsity crew on Mercer Lake during the 2017 season.

thought it was such a massive undertaking that would forge him in a life-altering way,” she said. “You don’t spend that much time by yourself at the mercy of the ocean without it leaving a mark on your soul.”

## PREPARATION

Significant weight loss is typical for Atlantic rowers, and so Crane ate unceasingly in preparation for the race’s December start date, hoping to add bulk to his 160-pound frame. His weight peaked at 176 pounds in the fall but eventually dropped to 168 pounds by race day. He also lifted weights and spent a lot of time on the rowing machine.

In September, three months before the race, Crane went to Devon, England, a fishing village on Britain’s Southwest coast, to purchase the Homeward Bound.

It was at least slightly reassuring to his father that the Homeward Bound had completed an Atlantic crossing the year before. The 23-foot custom-built boat “reputedly was the only boat that never capsized last year — and that was a key selling point to us,” David Crane wrote in one of his frequent social media posts that laid bare his excitement and angst about his son’s journey.

After purchasing the boat, Crane remained in Devon for two months to train for the event. As he headed home in October, the Homeward Bound would be driven through Europe and eventually ferried to the Atlantic Challenge starting point, La Gomera in the Canary Islands.

## “MOTHER, I WILL BE OK.”

Crane’s parents were anxious in the hours leading up to their son’s departure from La Gomera Marina. “I needed to move,” David Crane posted on Facebook. “I wandered the

deck talking to the other teams, and I scoured the town looking for Pringles and other things he could take.”

Set to begin on December 12, the race was delayed 48 hours after gale-force winds prompted safety concerns. In what David Crane described as “childlike joy,” his son emerged from the daily briefing on December 14 with his arms full of emergency flares, the final piece of safety equipment distributed by race organizers and an indication that the race was about to begin. As he was going over last-minute preparations, Crane enveloped his mother in a giant hug and gently reassured her, “Mother, I will be OK.”

Soon after he departed La Gomera, Crane began to realize the enormity of his situation. “It set in after I took that first stroke out of the harbor, knowing that I had a million more to go.”

## IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES

Solo rowers continuously need to be aware of their surroundings. They must regularly check their course and adjust the boat’s rudder.

Crane initially worked in two-hour shifts, rowing for two hours and spending the next couple of hours eating, cleaning the boat and cleaning himself. It was an efficient timetable, but as his body began to struggle with

## THE RACE

**NAME:** 2017 Talisker Whiskey Atlantic Challenge, the “World’s Toughest Row”

**TEAM NAME:** Homeward Bound, one of 28 teams (six solo, nine pairs, one trio and 12 fours) from around the world

**ORIGIN:** La Gomera, Canary Islands

**DESTINATION:** Nelson’s Dockyard English Harbour, Antigua

**START DATE:** December 14, 2017 (original 12/12 start date delayed due to weather)

**MILES ROWED:** 3,000 nautical miles

**TIME AT SEA:** 44 days, 16 hours and nine minutes



Crane encountered humongous waves and capsized six times during the Atlantic Challenge. (Atlantic Campaigns)

## THE BOAT

Crane journeyed on the SS4; a custom built 23-foot rowing boat outfitted with a solar-powered water maker, a VHF radio and other navigational systems. The boat has two small, watertight cabins — one for the water maker and one for sleeping and holing up during storms. Crane's ocean rowing toilet was a sturdy bucket from Home Depot.

sleep deprivation, he was forced to adjust his schedule.

"I would wake up at four in the morning, try to row as much as I could in the daylight when it was a lot easier to see the waves coming at me, and then try to get a three-hour chunk of sleep around one in the morning," he said.

He encountered other challenges early on too, including constant seasickness.

"I couldn't eat anything substantial without vomiting, and I immediately started losing a lot of weight," he said.

Since he was unable to hold down the calorie-packed freeze-dried meals that he brought with him, Crane switched to a diet of

Pringles, nuts and candy. "I ate mainly junk food," he said. The one food he didn't tire of was Nature Valley granola bars. "I ate them every morning."

### "MY ROW IS OVER."

On day five, Crane felt a sharp pain in his ankle. A blister he had gotten on the first day of the race had become severely infected.

His first thought: "My row is over."

He called the race doctor on his satellite phone: "He said I couldn't take antibiotics because of sun sensitivity, and I needed to cut off the infected flesh."

Armed with a scalpel, he followed the doctor's instructions.

Crane: "Since that experience, I've realized that when we get pushed to our breaking point, it's important to remember the impermanence of everything. Nothing lasts forever. The good or the bad. Especially pain."

It would take 60 days for the wound to heal.

### THE LONELIEST BOAT ON THE OCEAN

At times, Crane was separated by more than 100 nautical miles from other teams both ahead and behind him, prompting his father to label the Homeward Bound, the "loneliest boat on the ocean."

The solitude was crushing for Crane. "I would go in my cabin after finishing a rowing shift, and I would just cry. It was hard dealing with the physical challenges while I was also feeling so alone."

Crane brought along an iPod for entertainment, with a playlist of nearly 1,000 songs including “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival (his favorite song) and Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama.” Unfortunately, his speakers landed overboard relatively early in the trip, and salt erosion damaged his iPod.

He had a lot of time to think. At times, his thoughts turned to Peddie.

“Those four years had such an impact on my life,” he said. “I thought about all the good times I had on the crew team, and all the times I shared with my friends. It helped me feel like I wasn’t alone.”

## CHRISTMAS ON THE ATLANTIC

There was a bright spot on Christmas Day.

To get into a festive mood, Crane donned a Santa suit and put up holiday lights in his cabin. His parents even packed a few presents for him to open while at sea.

He also had a rendezvous with a passing yacht.

“They started chanting my name and singing Christmas carols, which was the best Christmas present I’ve ever gotten,” he said. It turned out that the yachters, who seemed to have come out of nowhere, had been tracking Oliver on the race tracker and knew his course. “It was amazing, though it did make me wonder for a bit whether I’d finally become delusional and completely lost my mind.”

Dressed in a Santa suit, Crane greets passengers in a passing yacht on Christmas Day. (Sam Swan)



## THE CAUSES

Crane rowed on behalf of Oceana and HomeFront, two social causes close to his heart. Oceana ([oceana.org](http://oceana.org)) is the largest international advocacy organization in the world focused solely on ocean conservation. HomeFront ([homefrontnj.org](http://homefrontnj.org)) is working to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness in Central New Jersey. To date, Oliver has raised more than \$70,000 for the two organizations.

## A NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE

The weather was more turbulent than usual for this year’s race participants. Intense winds enabled teams to push ahead of schedule, some at a record pace.

But those same conditions also proved terrifying.

The Homeward Bound capsized six times during the crossing. Crane described the first two times his boat overturned as a “thrilling adrenaline rush.” Next came an experience that had him fearing for his life.

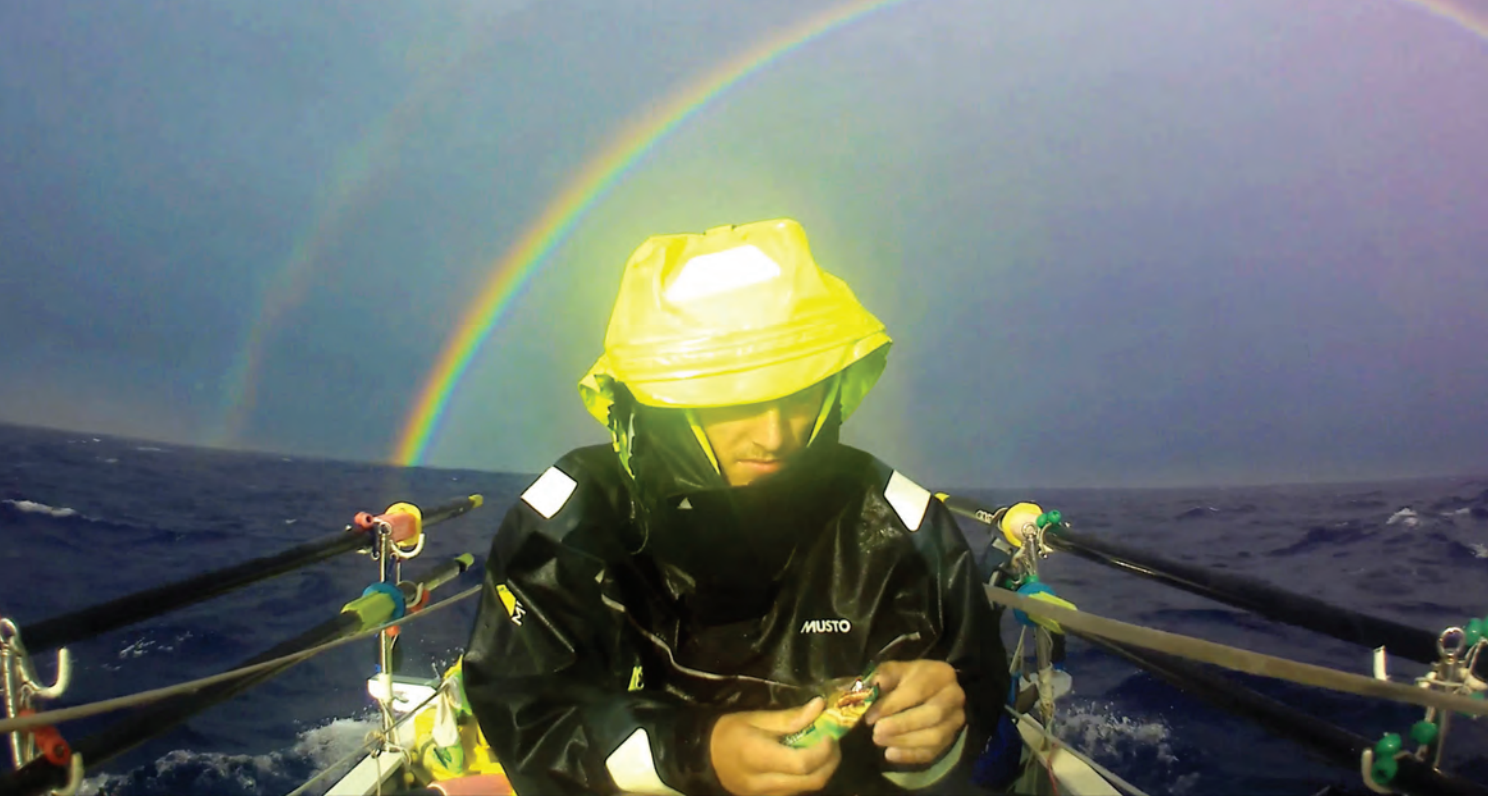
Shortly after Christmas Day, an encounter with a ginormous 40-foot wave left Crane underwater with his feet strapped into his rowing foot plates.

*“The wave crashed right on deck and blew me back and flipped the boat right away. I was upside-down underwater, and I couldn’t get out because I was tied by my feet. I felt that fear. That instinctual fear rising up inside of me. That animalistic desperation to survive. I kicked and kicked, and I felt my chest tightening. I finally kicked my shoes off and managed to get to the surface in time.”*

After this near-death experience, Crane hid in his cabin, terrified that he would have to go through this harrowing experience again.

*“But that fear wasn’t helping me in any way. It wasn’t going to prevent those waves from crashing on the deck. A big part of my row following that experience was me trying to control that fear. Realizing the futility of it.”*

Crane ended up capsizing three more times but, thankfully, did not have another close call.



Along the journey, Crane saw whales, dolphins and “massive double rainbows.” (Oliver Crane)

## CALM SEAS

At last, twenty-six days into his journey, Crane experienced calm seas. Now, he could fully appreciate the beauty of his surroundings.

He saw whales (one popped up less than three feet in front of his boat), dolphins and “massive double rainbows.” He was awed by the ocean at night, which became “flat as a mirror, glistening from a sky littered with countless stars.”

Crane was grateful for the improved weather, but he missed the winds as they had provided much-needed relief from the sun. Rowing shifts were torturous in the blazing heat, and the temperature in his cabin climbed to 120 degrees.

The journey continued to take a physical toll on his body. Crane never recovered from his weight loss, and that seemed to make everything harder. “Any movement I make on the boat is accompanied by a chorus of groans,” he wrote in his log.

## FIN

Crane was thrilled when he finally caught sight of land again.

“After all those days rowing toward an empty horizon, to have the finish finally be within sight was incredible,” he recalled.

But he was also anxious about returning to civilization.

“On one hand I was so excited to see my family and everyone, but I was

worried about how I was going to be after spending all that time by myself.”

Crane rowed into English Harbour in Antigua around 1 a.m. on Sunday, January 28, after 44 days, 16 hours and nine minutes at sea. He lit his flares to celebrate a successful ocean crossing in front of a jubilant crowd of friends, family and spectators.

After a physical, during which he learned that he had lost 25 pounds and dropped to four percent body fat, Oliver indulged in a traditional ocean rower meal: a cheeseburger, fries and a Coke.


It was overwhelming for Crane to adjust back to “normal” life after 44 days in isolation.

*“My body was a wreck. I couldn’t even walk because I was so used to being on the boat. For the first few days, I had to have people support me when I walked. When I tried to sleep the first night, I closed my eyes and got bad motion sickness because I was so used to being cradled by the boat and the waves.”*

He also had to adjust mentally. He went on, “You would think that after

spending all of that time by myself I would want to be surrounded by people, but it was hard. All the sights, sounds and even smells were so much to process compared to how simple life had been on the boat. Even the smell of humans was unfamiliar.”

There has been little rest for the Guinness World Record holder since his return. Crane rowed to benefit two charities, Oceana and HomeFront, and he embarked on a speaking tour this spring to help raise awareness about these organizations’ work. During a visit to Peddie in April he spoke to the community in Chapel about his extraordinary quest across the Atlantic. In May, Crane and his mom hiked the nearly 500-mile Camino de Santiago in Spain. This fall, Crane will attend Princeton University where he thinks he will major in political science.

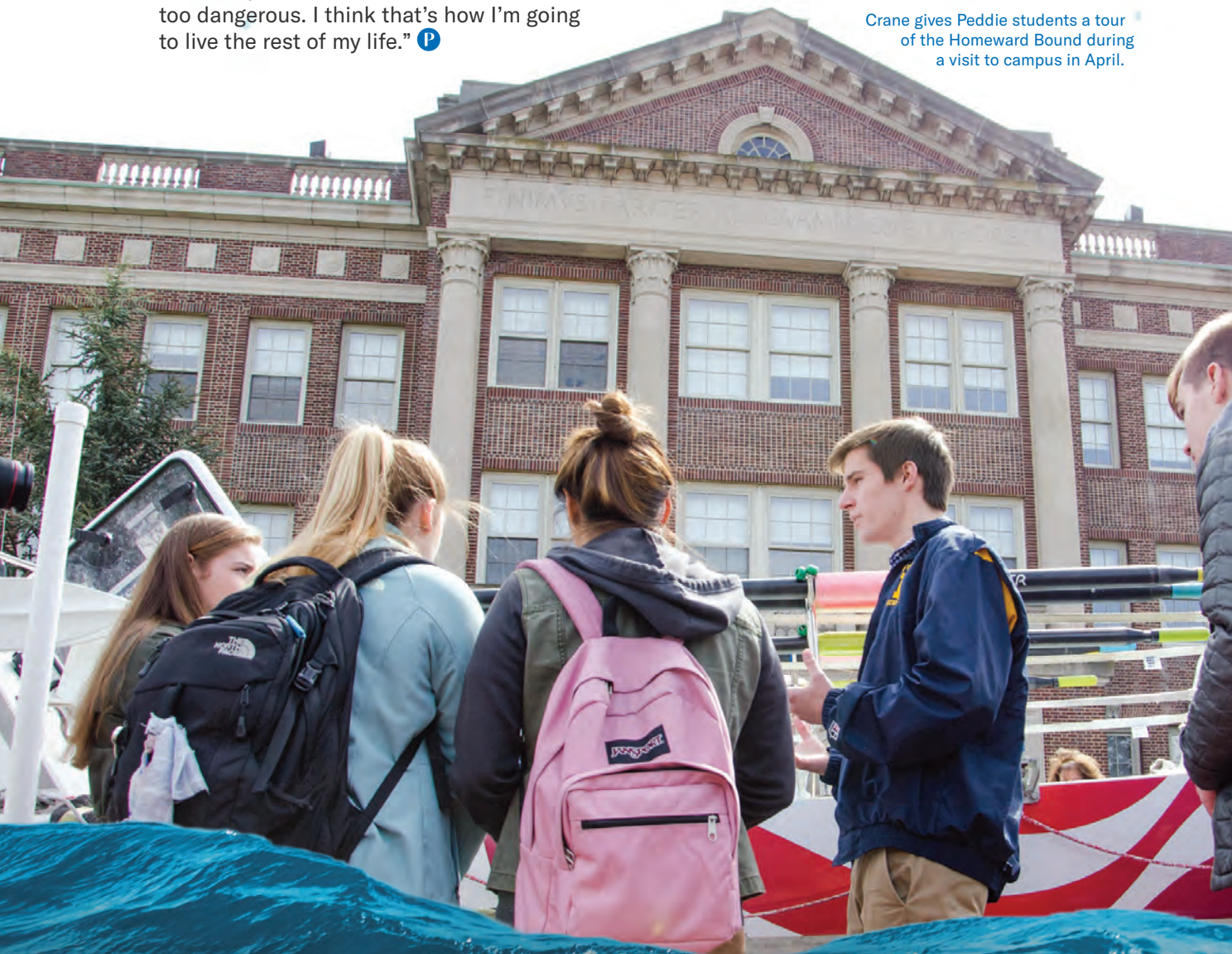
It’s likely that we will hear of other gutsy adventures by the unsinkable Oliver Crane. Crane: “I think one of the biggest mistakes you can make in life is to not try something because you are scared or because it seems too dangerous. I think that’s how I’m going to live the rest of my life.” 

## DID YOU KNOW?

In 1966, British Sir Chay Blyth and John Ridgway made history by becoming the first men to row the Atlantic. It was a 92-day battle against hurricanes and a near-starvation diet.

Blyth decided he would create a new event for people who wanted to take on the challenge of rowing the Atlantic. The first race was held in 1997. The event changed sponsors throughout the years, eventually becoming the Talisker Whiskey Atlantic Challenge in 2011.

Crane gives Peddie students a tour of the Homeward Bound during a visit to campus in April.



# MOVING MOMENTS

Crane used a satellite phone to communicate with race coordinators and his family. His father, David Crane, kept family, friends and fans up to date on his son's progress on social media. Here is a chronicle of Crane's journey based on interviews and updates he provided to his family.

## DAY 3

*December 17, 2017*

Crane encounters immediate challenges, including constant seasickness. Crane: "Who knew being confined to a 20-foot boat in the Atlantic by yourself would be lonely, right? It's really been a mental struggle staying positive when I think about how much time I have left out here. I'm sure it'll get more enjoyable once I adapt."

## DAY 6

*December 20, 2017*

After a blister on his ankle becomes infected, Crane uses a scalpel to cut off the infected flesh. It takes 60 days to heal. Crane: "Nothing really heals out on the Atlantic."

## DAY 8-9

*December 22-23, 2017*

The weather becomes problematic. A vessel rescues a duo who spent 12 hours in a life raft after their boat capsized in a storm. Another team safely boards a passing freighter after their boat flips and catches fire. Crane experiences "house-sized" waves and strong winds. A massive wave lifts his boat and nearly flips it over.

## DAY 11

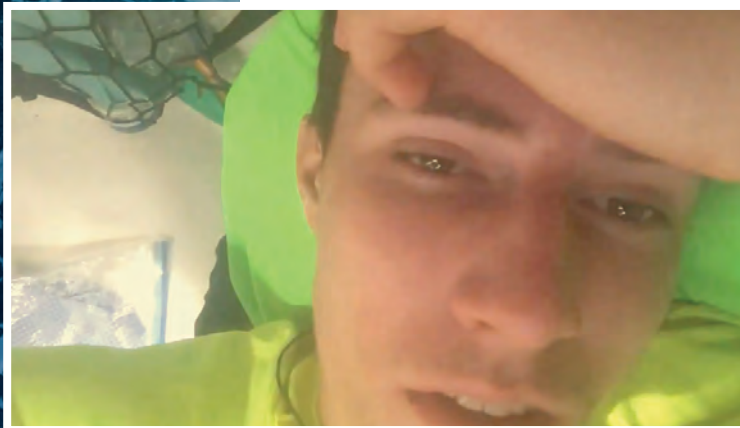
*December 25, 2017*

Before the race, Crane packs a Santa outfit in anticipation of being alone at sea for Christmas. On Christmas Day, a passing yacht named Anne pulls up alongside him, and the passengers sing him Christmas carols. "OLIVER CRANE," they shout. "We are here to wish you a Merry Christmas!"

## DAY 12

*December 26, 2017*

Crane's boat capsizes in what he describes as a "near-death experience." While at the oars a 40-foot wave comes from behind, crashes on the deck and flips his boat. Fortunately, Crane is tethered to the boat so it won't blow away from him in the high winds. But his feet remain strapped to the rowing foot plate while he's upside down underwater. Crane struggles and finally manages to wiggle his feet out of his shoes and kick to the surface, but while attempting to climb back on board, the boat rolls again. He hangs on and is thrown on to the deck as the boat rights itself. Crane records his immediate reaction after he reaches the surface: "I couldn't get out of my shoes. I've been underwater for so long. It's just so dark, and I haven't really been truly scared yet, scared of dying. But I feel it now."





## DAY 16

*December 30, 2017*

Crane's body is covered in sores, bruises and cuts, but he says that conditions have improved. Crane: "On the physical side, my body is already a lot weaker than when I started, and I have trouble finishing my rowing shifts. I'm trying to increase my calorie intake, but I've already lost so much weight from the first week where I barely ate. The weight loss has made everything harder. Even when I'm sleeping, I have to constantly change positions because I'm so bony and my hips get sore. Mentally things are a lot better though. I've gotten used to just thinking about different things for hours on end almost daydreaming in a way. I've had a lot more practice now that my speakers are gone (I lost them when I capsized). But it's amazing how unfamiliar actual thinking feels. At home life is busy and you never really have time to just sit down and think."

## DAY 20

*January 3, 2018*

Crane and the rest of the Atlantic Challenge fleet continue to cross the Atlantic in sustained heavy winds. During a call to his family, Crane learns that his sister, Bella, is recovering from a severe snowboarding accident in which she broke her neck. As his family reassures him that Bella is going to be OK, Crane needs to hang up. Another big wave is coming up.

## DAY 26

*January 9, 2018*

For the first time in 24 days, Crane finds himself in calm seas. He showers (which consists of holding a 5-liter water bottle over his head) and puts on the first set of clothes that he's worn since departing La Gomera. He decides to skip a night shift and do some star gazing.

## DAY 31

*January 14, 2018*

Crane: "The Atlantic is truly magnificent. It's hard to put into words the feeling of standing on a three-foot high boat, surrounded by waves as big as buildings crashing around you for as far as the eye can see — the saltiness of the ocean spray ... But even completely surrounded by nature thousands of miles from land, I've still been reminded of mankind's impact on nature. Almost every day I've seen various pieces of trash drift by my boat. And when you consider the vastness of the Atlantic, the idea that I'm seeing this much garbage is frightening. Being witness to this is more moving than I would have even thought, making me more inspired than ever by the work of Oceana and others to save our oceans and clean our waters."

## DAY 36

*January 19, 2018*

David Crane: "Oliver called today, and he sounded as tired as I have ever heard him. He misses the wind, not so much because it propels him, but because the heat is brutal. The cabin is 120 degrees with the door closed — as it must stay — and the sun pounds down on him all day. He goes in the water to scrape off the barnacles that slow the boat and to cool down but obviously being out of the boat impedes his progress ... It is tough thinking about him in extreme discomfort out there but he says he is eating and staying hydrated and, with 471 nautical miles (NM) to go as of midnight Antigua time, he is getting close to the point where he just needs to hang in there for a few days more."

## DAY 38

January 21, 2018

Before his departure, Crane requests that his family refrain from updating him on the fate of his beloved Philadelphia Eagles, who have entered the postseason. But in a phone call with his family, Crane's younger brother, Christopher, lets it slip that he is headed off to the NFC Championship Game. Crane realizes that the Eagles have survived the first round of the playoffs. His family promises not to share the results of the game.

## DAY 41

January 24, 2018

Crane: "Final week!!! I can't believe Antigua is almost within sight. Despite being so close, everything has just gotten harder. My body is really feeling it now. Any movement I make on the boat is accompanied by a chorus of groans. There are so many different places that hurt it would be pointless listing them all. I'm most worried about my weak knee (the one I foot steer) which is finally starting to go ... I try to remember though it's all about my mindset and how I handle the pain (despite all my complaining) ...

"Now that I'm done listing all my grievances, I can focus on the positives. I saw whales the other day! I heard a massive spout of air and turned behind me to see a tail of a whale less than three feet in front of my boat. A few more swam by over the course of the next few minutes which was awesome. I'm also seeing more and more different kinds of birds which is cool. And of course, the stars continue to be amazing. I put on my foul weather gear and lay on deck last night for a while soaking in the view."

## DAY 44

January 27, 2018

With 35 NM to go, Crane calls his family, who are now in Antigua waiting for his arrival. David Crane: "It was all so bitter-sweet for him – the excitement of being home against the shock of no longer being at one with the ocean. He was also anxious about finishing at a reasonable hour Saturday night Antigua time given that he was already spent physically and it wasn't even midday yet. He seemed to fear that if he arrived too late, all of us would go back to our hotels and he would arrive at an empty dock. We assured him that no matter the time of his arrival, Team Ollie would be out in full force and cheering in full throat."





Oliver Crane (center) celebrates the end of his voyage with (L to R) father, David; sister, Bella; mother, Isabella de la Houssaye; and brother Cason. (Ted Talisker Whiskey Atlantic Challenge)



## VOYAGE ENDS

January 28, 2018

Crane arrives at Antigua's English Harbour around 1 a.m. local time. At 19 years old, he has become the youngest person to row solo across the Atlantic. He also has the distinction of having lost the most body weight during the race. After a physical, Crane enjoys a 2 a.m. meal of a cheeseburger, French fries and a Coke. As his family and friends bring him up to date on current events, his sister, Bella, lets it slip that the Eagles are in the Super Bowl. David Crane: "The room full of people carefully suppressing that news issued an immediate collective groan ... Bella immediately assumed a 'deer in the headlights' look until the pure joy that Oliver felt in that news engulfed the room, and all was forgiven (almost). To be surpassed a few moments later when Isabella had the privilege of telling Oliver he would, in fact, be attending the Super Bowl next Sunday, accompanied by his youngest brother, Christopher. With that revelation, Oliver literally wept (although it may have been because his cheeseburger and fries were finished)."