

Team Kuaka

Interviewer: Jesse Wiegel

Interviewee: Greg Pittams

Q So what is on your to-do list for the race?

A So at the moment my boat is still being modified in New Zealand, so once that's done I'll need to go down there, test it out, do any fine tuning that needs doing before it goes in a container. That's kind of -- that's the big one. And then there's a bunch of stuff that I can do in Hong Kong to sort of dial in my systems about, you know, getting off the water, getting camp set up and then getting back on the water. Which traditionally when I've done these sort of long distance things, my getting up, getting breakfast and getting back on the water has taken a huge amount of time. I don't function terribly well in the morning so I'm trying to dial in that a little bit more. I'm not a

morning person.

Q No. I mean, as we're talking right now, it's 7:00 a.m. for you and 3:00 p.m. for me and I can see, yeah, you just woke up. I can tell.

A Yeah.

Q So those modifications you're getting done in New Zealand, is that largely like gear storage considerations or is it like customizing the boat for you?

A It's mostly gear storage is the big one. The donor boat that I'm using is one that I already had in New Zealand, and it's not the ideal boat. But it's not far off.

Q But I think it might be arguable, a lot of people who follow the race, that maybe an outrigger canoe that's mere inches wide might not be the most suitable for the boat like full stop. Why an OC1?

A Well, I mean, the main reason is that that's what I paddle. And so I race OC1s. I've been

in OC1s for a really long time. I'd like to say that, you know, it speaks to me as a New Zealander. Waka Ama is a big cultural thing down there. But you know, I never did it in New Zealand. I picked it up when I've been in Hong Kong. But it's the boat that I paddle.

To a certain extent, it's actually a really capable boat. They're faster than an equivalent kayak. They're a lot more stable, a lot safer in bigger water. So they're a very capable boat. The downside is that they can't carry a lot of stuff.

Q Yeah.

A So I know they can handle the water. But you know, can I get enough stuff on it to actually make it that distance. That's the question.

Q You know, I remember in your application last year for doing the proving ground, you wrote something about how, you know, it's a super, super stable boat except maybe if you get a port-

side crosswind. And how often is that likely to happen in the Strait of Juan de Fuca? So I think it's possible you may run into a little bit of that portside stuff. Is that what contributed to your swim you took last year? We've got this great video. If people haven't seen it, go back and look at our coverage of 2023. Greg getting -- he's testing the water really. I have to bring up another thing you wrote in your application from this year. You say that you did 70-48. You did the proving ground, and you only fell off once. But we have proof, Greg, that you fell off twice.

A Well, yeah, getting back on I fell off.

Q All right. Okay. That's a gimme I guess?

A Yeah. I've actually spoken to a couple of people about either putting an ama on the other side or putting two amas on. Because it's not just the Strait of Juan de Fuca, it's Cape Caution and --

Q Of course, Johnstone?

A Yeah. Johnstone is coming from all directions, kind of six of one, half dozen of the other. But there are several points where you're open to the Pacific, you know, on the portside. And for some reason, I don't like it esthetically. Every outrigger canoe has always got the ama on the left. It offends my sense of esthetics to put it on the other side.

Q Esthetics, I mean it's important definitely.

A Yeah.

Q So it's kind of the ultimate solo craft, isn't it, and there's something -- there's this great divide I think between all the racers who are on teams and those who go solo. It's such a different experience, and standing on the dock in Ketchikan, being the person who has kind of the honor to receive everyone on the dock, there is just a different look in the eyes of a person who just spent 700 miles solo. And you know, I

used to do some solo backpacking, and I remember, like it's funny, after some amount of time you start to either devolve or evolve to where you are occupying your mind in certain ways. And I remember at points, you know, hiking across the Mojave belting out all of my favorite songs from Jesus Christ Superstar. What is your -- what do you do when you're nine days into a solo trip? Where does your mind go?

A There's some music. I do maths in my head, sort of weird calculations. And they get more and more complex the longer I'm out.

Q What are you calculating?

A All sorts of stuff. Mostly the distance I've paddled, how much further it is to go, what is it as a percentage, what is it as a fraction. But then I'm also doing how much water have I drank, how much food have I consumed? You know, all of that starts to be I'm 25 percent in or 27 percent in. And then I've only covered this

much distance so I need to reduce the amount of food I'm taking per kilometre by 18 percent -- you know.

Q So speaking of food, and not to hop around subjects too much, but speaking of food, I'm curious. Your capacity. No matter how much your talented New Zealand builder is going to do to that boat, there isn't much storage on there. So what kind of stuff are you eating? I know we've had paddlers in the past who have pared down to the bare minimal, just drinking olive oil. How do you get the calories in and not get sick and tired of the food?

A Not getting sick and tired is a thing -- I mean I will get sick and tired of it. That's just going to happen. When I go back to New Zealand, that's kind of what I need to establish, what the actual capacity of the boat is. There's no real way of calculating that. It's a feel for how low you're sitting in the water and how much

drag there is and how slow it feels to paddle.

So once I've calculated that capacity, I'm going to work out what the resupply plan is. I'm guessing there will be a resupply in Bella Bella. I'll have to stop in there and just get whatever is in the shop, which I'm assuming will be rice and pasta.

Q Are you saying no stop in Campbell River? Just the first resupply in Bella?

A I'd like to not be reliant on supply stops. Well, as few as possible. Because if I'm coming through wherever I'm coming through, Campbell River and it's after the shops close, I don't want to -- if the tide is running the right way and I'm aiming for particularly Campbell River, if I'm aiming for a tide window at Seymour, then I'm going to push on.

Q Wow. I mean shoot. I never would have suspected you were going to go Victoria to Bella Bella on one resupply. That's a hefty jump.

A It's -- yeah. So mostly I'll be on, you know, fairly calorie-dense foods. Mostly freeze-dried meals, probably repackaged because volume is going to be almost as much as of a problem as weight.

Q Okay. So last year we saw you come out for the proving ground and I think you told me when we were standing on the dock, you told me you might stick around for a little while afterwards and explore the place. Is that something you ended up doing?

A Yeah, I did. I ended up going all the way up to Port Hardy. All the way up to Port Hardy. Got the boat wet a couple of times up there. Had a look at the water. Obviously when I was up there, the conditions, the weather was fantastic for my whole trip, which may not be a particularly good indication of what to expect. But you know, I got a feel for -- partly I was getting a feel for what's available in the shops

in those small towns all the way up the island.

Q Okay, yeah.

A And partly to have a look at the water. The boat got into Seymour Narrows, which was good. Because I don't paddle a lot in places with massive tidal movements.

Q Sure.

A And so just getting into Seymour Narrows in a slack and seeing what it's actually like calmed me down a bit.

Q Do you feel like you experienced a slack? I've noticed any time I've been sitting in there when the clock says it should be slack, there's still a lot of water moving around.

A Yeah, that's kind of what I wanted to see. And yeah, you're right, even when there's theoretically no water movement, there's a lot of water movement out there.

Q So you're talking about if you're in Campbell and the tides are right, you're going to push

through there in the night. You feel good about busting through that monster in the nighttime?

A Well, I don't know about -- if it's absolute slack, maybe. I'm pretty comfortable paddling at night. I do a lot of paddling near at night.

Q Yeah, so you've been paddling outrigger canoes is it 15 years round about?

A Yeah, something like that.

Q And in Hong Kong too. I've never been in the waters of Hong Kong. An hour or so ago I was looking on marine traffic. I wanted to see what Hong Kong looks like, and yeah, that is something of a busy port. And it seems like there's a big canoe scene out there.

A Yeah, there's seven outrigger clubs here. There's a reasonable race scene. Yeah.

Q And you said you got into outrigger racing after you got to Hong Kong. But before I ask you about that, how did you get to Hong Kong?

You're from New Zealand. What brought you up to

Hong Kong?

A Most of the people who are sort of long-term residents of Hong Kong, I sort of came here passing through or on a short-term contract and just ended up staying. I came up pretty much on holiday. I cycled Singapore to Bangkok and then kind of finished in Bangkok and ran out of money. Went to go and visit a buddy of mine in Hong Kong and ended up staying here for coming up 30 years.

Q That's a long layover on a bike tour. You still got the bike ready to go?

A No, that fell apart. Hong Kong is really not a good place for cycling.

Q So you've got the competitive spirit in you. And I think, well, so far looking in my inbox there's no other outrigger canoes applying for the race. So you don't have anyone in your class.

A I have a suspicion there will be an OC2.

Q Oh, you have a suspicion. Well, is it really a race between a 1 and a 2?

A No. 2s are way faster.

Q If I was to ask you, what is it you're competing against? You got to be competing against something.

A Not really. Competing against the grim sweeper I guess. I mean, I would like to finish -- I don't know, I sort of have a time in mind that I'd like to finish in. But you know, if I don't hit that, then I'll head back up times and there's the grim sweeper.

Q You'll redo the maths in your head and have something else to think about.

A Exactly. Exactly.

Q Greg, you also wrote in your application that you're aiming to finish in such a good time that songs are written about me. And I was wondering, what band or recording artist is going to sing that song about Kuaka?

A Probably a very obscure band from Seattle because you know, there's a music scene there.

Q We have a little music scene.

A Yeah. I don't have any bands in mind. Probably not the Rolling Stones.

Q After your race last year, you went and paddled, checked it out, and then you went back to Hong Kong and have probably done all sorts of adventures between now and then. But I know that you've been thinking about the full race. You were thinking about the full race even before you were done with the first race last year?

A I've been thinking about the full race since 2015.

Q And then you had something to actually like that you have experienced about this place. If you close your eyes and you think about the race, what has stood out the most to you in your memory of what you experienced last year that

you're looking forward to doing again?

A I just love the scenery out there. It was amazing. Like, the water is beautiful. There's so much wildlife. The way the mountains come down to the ocean, it's a spectacular part of the world. 70-48 was the same. I was expecting something a bit more urban than what it was. You know, I was expecting some of the stuff we do in Hong Kong is, you know, by Hong Kong standards pretty remote. And you're at the back of Hong Kong island; it's cliffs and sea. There are parts of Hong Kong that don't feel like you're in the middle of a massive city. But 70-48 was amazing. And then as you get further north up Vancouver Island, it's -- there's just nothing near. It's just trees and whales. It's spectacular.

Q It is.

A And it surprised me how quickly when you get out of any of the towns, it turns into that. So

yeah, I'm looking forward to being in an actual wilderness, which I don't get a lot of.

Q Well, we've got what is it, a few months left before this goes down. I'm sure you've got all sorts of adventures planned. I know you've got some social media channels. I know you have a defunct as yet working website that will be TeamKuaka.com?

A Oh, yeah.

Q So I hope you throw a bunch of stuff on there about your training. It's really going to be fun to follow you, and then have you back in town.

A Yeah, looking forward to it.

Q Well, thanks, Greg, and we'll see you in June.

A Okay, thank you.

Transcribed by Kelsey Fletcher