

Toronto Islander oldest man to row across Atlantic

Tom Butscher arrived in Barbados Friday morning after a 52-day, 5,000-kilometre row from Morocco



Tom Butscher, 67, celebrates his return to dry land in Barbados. The Toronto Island man became the oldest man to row across the Atlantic after a 52-day trip aboard ocean catamaran Big Blue.

By CYNTHIA VUKETS Staff Reporter

A Toronto Island resident has become the oldest person to row across the Atlantic Ocean, landing in Barbados Friday after rowing 12 hours a day for 52 days. “We’ve been looking forward to getting here,” Tom Butscher, 67, said from his hotel in Port St. Charles, just hours after reaching dry land. He completed the more than 5,000 kilometre journey from Morocco to Barbados aboard Big Blue, an ocean rowing catamaran.

Butscher, a former Canadian long-track speed skating champion and father of two who has already rowed solo across Lake Ontario, set out Jan. 11 with 15 other crew members. They rowed for two hours and rested for two hours, 24 hours a day to try to break the world record of 33 days to row across the Atlantic. Butscher rowed with six other Canadians, and crew members from the United States, Georgia, Austria and the United Kingdom. They were participating in a world record attempt involving several other boats.

“I didn’t really notice how tired I was until maybe two days ago, can you believe it?” said Butscher. “It was easier than I thought,” he added, when asked about adjusting to two-hour sleep cycles. “There was some sleep deprivation of course.”

The crew ate freeze-dried meals and drank Gatorade to replace the thousands of calories they burned rowing. Butscher said the captain organized meals, but the rowers were responsible for their own snacks. “I went to Bulk Barn and got stuff to make trail mix,” he explained. “It worked out extremely well. Very nutritious. Very easy to prepare. I had actually too much of it!”

The crew realized early on they would not beat the record, said rower Zachary Scher, 22, originally from Richmond Hill. Strong winds and high waves hindered their progress, he said, and the boat spent several days anchored just off the edge of North Africa. Scher said the most difficult part of the trip was being away so long. The best part? No exposure to advertising or mass media. “Living a simple life. It really put some things in perspective,” said the University of Guelph science student and part-time firefighter.

Butscher said he most enjoyed being on the ocean, seeing whales and dolphins, and watching the stars. “It’s a beautiful thing to row across the Atlantic. The ocean. The animals we met. The nights. The days. It’s difficult to explain. For me, as a rower, it was a beautiful thing to be in that boat with these people,” he said. Big Blue turned out to be a tad slow, he added, but well built. In the middle of the ocean, strong winds created waves up to 12 metres high: “Like walls of water!”

Family members, including Scher’s dad, Jeff, and Butscher’s wife, Luisa Milan, met the crew in Barbados early Friday morning. Reached in Toronto, Isabella Butscher called her dad an inspiration. “I’m thrilled that they made it and I’m so proud of him and the rest of the crew,” she said, adding she never worried whether they’d make it back safe. For Scher, who said he was “ecstatic” to be back on dry land, there may not be a second ocean voyage. “Once is enough, but I’m definitely looking for other adventures,” he said.

Butscher was vague when asked about his next undertaking. “I don’t know yet. I have some plans, but I can’t really talk about it,” was all he would allow. He was clear about one thing: he may be the oldest person to ever row across the Atlantic, but he doesn’t feel old. “Just tired,” he said. “You know, I’m in fine shape. I’ve been an athlete all my life. I just need a couple days of sleep and I’m going to be looking for a bicycle so I can ride around the island here.”

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