Home International Regatta; Spitfire's first international adventure:

Thursday 21st July 2022

We de-rigged Spitfire with David one of my coaches at Marlow Rowing Club, ready for him to be collected and we packed everything else into my van (Fergus).



De Rigged Spitfire

Spitfire's transport arrived and we loaded him up onto the trailer.



Spitfire is on his way to the Home International

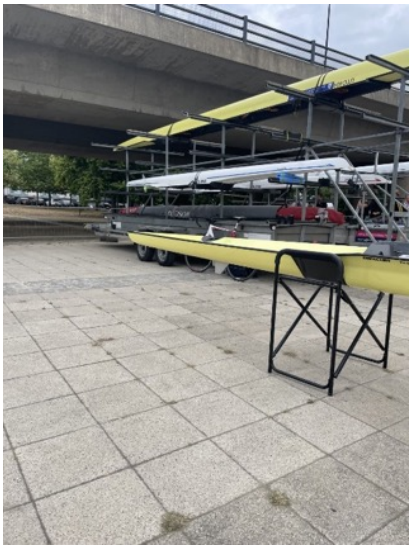
Friday 22nd July 2022

We woke up early had breakfast and loaded Fergus up ready for a busy few days. It's a good job I have a van as we had so much stuff; the rigging from Spitfire with floats, my oars, trestles, my seat and everything else!



We had a good journey and arrived in the Docklands just before 9am

It was time to find the Welsh team and Spitfire my boat. It was busy with Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales being there. I have never seen so many boats!



We found Spitfire

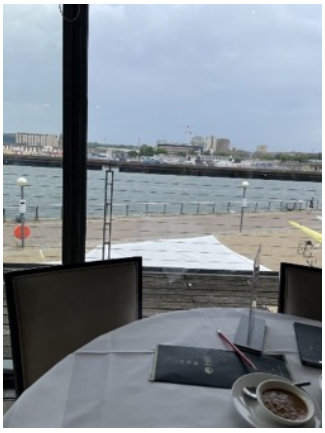
Darren the ladies coach came over to introduce himself. He helped us re-rig Spitfire and then we had to tie him down back on the trailer as it was so windy.



Spitfire all ready to go

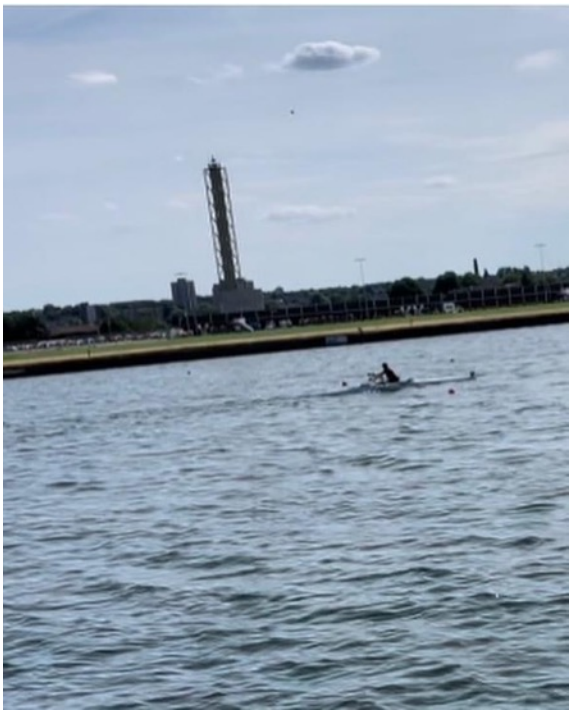
My oars went off to have Dragons put onto them. The water was shut to boats as the conditions were too dangerous. So we decided to go and find the Welsh accommodation and have lunch; if the weather conditions improved we would go out later. Wales had sorted out some blue badge parking so me and dad left the Docklands and drove to where the accommodation was; we met Helen the Welsh Administrator and settled into the accommodation. I had an accessible studio which was amazing.

Back to the venue and dad decided we should walk; well in my case drive my electric wheelchair along the length of the course; blimey it was a long way! It was time for lunch; me and dad found a lovely Chinese. The weather had improved although still very windy and the water looked like the sea; but it was safe for me and Spitfire to adventure out.



Our lunch view

Darren helped dad to put Spitfire on the water and off I went. Thankfully I had a safety launch very close to me which was super useful. I felt so proud rowing down the Docklands, it was a long way to the start. We arrived and it was time to row the 2k, it was really windy so I decided to take it slowly and do a few starts and then some harder strokes. I got in my lane and mostly managed to stay in it but the wind was blowing me left and I was struggling as my left arm is my weakest. The weather conditions had got worse so I was fighting against the wind but I made it safely back to the pontoon. The wind was strong and the waves were big so I arrived very quickly but we were back on land. First trip survived! Darren and Dad put Spitfire away.



Our first trip out on the Docklands; bit blurred the conditions weren't ideal!

The Docklands was right next London City Airport and so it was a different experience having aeroplanes taking off and landing right over your head. It was very noisy!

We stayed to watch some of the other Welsh rowers training and then it was time to head back to the accommodation to get changed as it was nearly time for dinner. It was a BBQ which was super yummy, we ate dinner with some of the Welsh team; there was even ice cream.

We then had quite a lot of time before the team presentations as the juniors had theirs first. So me and dad headed back to our accommodation to chill before the evening's entertainment. I was knackered!

It was time for the team presentation Ben Pritchard (a Welsh man who represented GB at the Tokyo Paralympics) was the speaker. Ben gave us some inspirational words and he presented us with our kit which included a Welsh tie (everyone that represents Wales gets one). It was very special and amazing to think I now had my first international vest. The Welsh ladies were having a photoshoot so we all put on our Welsh vests and had a team photograph with Ben and then we all had individual shots.



Welsh Women's Squad with Ben Pritchard

It was time for bed as I had to be up early as my race was at 9am!

Saturday 23rd July 2022

6:30 alarm and we were awake; I was full of nerves and excitement! First stop was breakfast and then it was time to head to the venue.

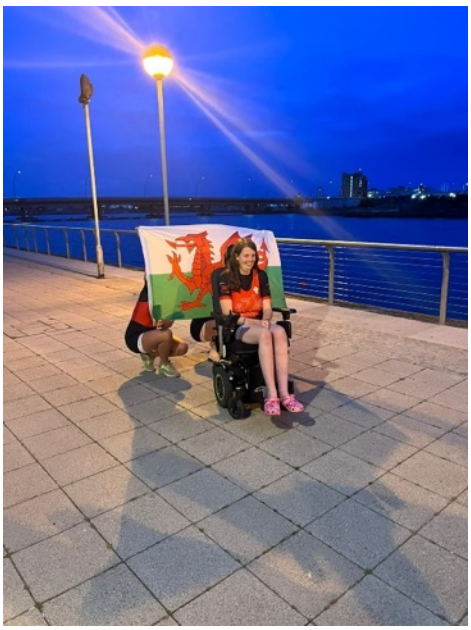
We arrived at the venue and found Darren and Spitfire. My oars had been painted with the Welsh Dragons and looked fantastic.





Welsh oars with the dragons

Mum arrived and it was time to head to the water for my first international race. Thankfully the weather conditions had improved and the water looked much stiller, no waves although there was still a wind but so much better.



Ready to go; in my first international vest

I started the long paddle down to the start line; proudly wearing my Welsh vest I think I was beaming. I made it to the start line and was ready to race 2k. I was a bit nervous as I had never done a stake board start before which is when someone holds your boat at the start. I learnt how to back down with both oars so basically you can move the boat forwards towards the starting line. Unfortunately for one reason or another we had a 30 minute delay before our race started; which meant that I was tired as I had to back it down about 20 times. But finally they were ready for the race to start, our boats were held onto but I wasn't ready for the umpires call as I only just had been held again but anyway the race had started. It was me another PR1 who was a guy and representing England and a PR3 (visually impaired) who was also representing England. I flew past the English PR1 and soared off into the distance; I did my 500m very fast. I got to 1k and the wind started to impact and so I slowed down. At this point or just before the PR3 flew past me (which you would expect despite her 2 minute handicap) as she uses her legs and I am in a fixed seat. Anyway I finally crossed the finish line my lungs let me down but we got there! I had won the PR1 section; but ended up coming 2nd overall as they put me with the PR3. I was exhausted but also very proud that I had just completed my first 2k. I knew it was a slow time but the weather conditions didn't help! The Welsh support was amazing; they were cheering me the whole way up the course!

It was time to get Spitfire out of the water and back to the trestles. We had a bit of time before my next race so it was time to chill and go and cheer on the rest of the Welsh team. It had become very warm so we sheltered in the Welsh marquee.

After seeing the result I was disappointed with the time but delighted to win the PR1 section no medal sadly as just the winner got one and I was put in with the PR3 so came 2nd.

It was lunch time and then before long it was time get ready for my second race. It was the first race of the afternoon. I started with my warm up stretches, mum and dad went to get everything ready and I joined them. The course had been shortened to 500m but it still started 2k up the river. The

wind had started to pick up and waves were forming on the water; I had a steady state paddle up to the start line with some sharp and fast bursts as the 500m was a sprint. I arrived at the start line and after a short wait the race was ready to start. Unfortunately there was a slight miscommunication from the umpire but eventually all was sorted and the race was started again. I got away quickly and felt good, making it to 250m but then I was really struggling with the wind that I was rowing into; I was rowing but didn't seem to be going very far for every stroke I took. There was no finish line and so I just kept going until someone said you have finished, but then I had to row the long way back to the pontoons. Blimey it was hard; the wind had really picked up but I eventually made it back to shore. I had come 2nd again, well won the PR1 section but come 2nd overall. It was time for a well-deserved ice cream.

Spitfire was de-rigged, everything had been put back into my van; it was time to load Spitfire back onto the trailer so that he could go home (back to Marlow Rowing Club). Whilst mum and dad were loading and strapping him down onto the trailer, I went to the podium to listened to the Welsh national anthem playing proudly as several Welsh crews had won their races. The event had finished and it was time to head home. We left Docklands and headed to the stables to see the horses and give them some treats. We then went home unpacked the van apart from the rowing stuff and had a nice pizza. We were awaiting the arrival of Spitfire at Marlow Rowing Club and had a text to say they were 30 minutes away. So off we all headed to Marlow; we retrieved Spitfire and re-rigged him before putting him away and then putting the oars and trestles away. It was then home and time for bed!

What a wonderful few days away with the Welsh team. I cannot thank everyone enough who made it possible. I never imagined a year after taking up Para Rowing that I would be rowing down the track at my first International race. The Douglas Bader Foundation for supporting the most amazing boat Spitfire. My amazing dad and mum who went above and beyond and have turned into real rowing helpers. David and everyone at Marlow who helped prepare me to compete. The Welsh team who were truly supportive; we had the best supporters and the loudest cheerleaders. Darren for the coaching support and Tom for transporting Spitfire. I am already looking forward to next year.