

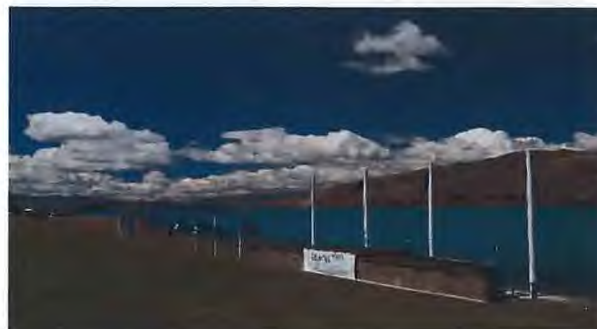
My accidental Gap Year and how I rowed in the New Zealand National Championships

My name is Dan. On results day 2016 I found out that I had missed the required grades for both my firm and insurance choices, one of which by 1 UMS. I got two subjects completely remarked and luckily one of them changed grade, meaning I had the required grades to go to Durham (my insurance choice), however I would have to make do with a college and accommodation that was not of my choosing. I therefore made a decision to take a Gap Year and go to university in the Autumn of 2017. It is fair to say that it is one of the better decisions that I have made.

My Dad was in touch with West End Rowing Club of Auckland in New Zealand at the time and whilst I was considering giving Sportlived a go, he asked the Club Captain whether there was a similar programme or offering in New Zealand. Out of the blue, David (the Club Captain) invited me to travel to stay with his family and row for West End for the summer season (November to February). It was unexpected, but after a few days of establishing the basics it was clear to me and my parents, that this was what I wanted to do for at least part of my year out. West End is the home club of Mahe Drysdale and other New Zealand Olympic rowers from Rio 2016 and has multiple athletes go to the Olympics in the past. The club is one of the main clubs on the North Island and has great facilities; with two boathouses, one on the Whau river in Auckland and one for training camps south of Auckland, in Mercer, on the Waikato river.

I wanted to give club rowing a try. It is very different in a number of ways to school rowing. My typical week had me getting up two mornings at 4.55 am to get to the club for 5.30 sessions as most club rowers have to get to work; with two evening sessions and a weekend session. As my stay was centred on rowing and had effectively no forward planning I didn't have time to set up a job that would fit with rowing training but I was lucky enough to earn some spending cash with some odd jobs. I am confident that with some forward planning I could have found a job in a local café or similar to keep me occupied for a few months and earn some money. I understand from David that West End want to set up something more structured this year or next and encourage or invite interested UK rowers to join West End and experience Club rowing whilst taking a gap year between school and university or university and work.

Club rowing gave me an insight into how the vast majority of adult rowers have to live and train; without the luxury of having most things done for them as at school and yet with a good standard of competition when it came to regattas. I rowed in 2 regattas on the North Island before Christmas, settling into a competitive crew after our New Year training camp (where we all cooked and shared tasks – a big difference to my camps at school). That was the beginning of the lead-in to the National Championships. This year they were held on Lake Ruataniwha near Twizel, in the middle of the south island. It is a beautiful location and very different to anything you will see in the UK. The racing is eight lane on a glacial meltwater lake, where the colour of the water is a spectacular blue.



Next year they will be held on Lake Karapiro, another man-made lake; a more traditional setting but just as beautiful. Karapiro is where the New Zealand national squad are based.

West End's plan for 2017/18 subject to demand and some details to be refined is to have rowers for at least the period from November to February to finish their rowing season at Karapiro in a competitive crew. I won the Club 2- B Final with my pairs partner, something I am proud of given that the winners of the event were two very talented oarsmen who won medals in other events at the regatta and went on to win the coxed four and eight at the Maadi Cup (NZ Secondary school rowing championships), one of those oarsmen has even been selected into the top NZ Junior crew for the 2017 Junior World Championships. The regatta also has events that are almost exclusive to the International and Development squads so I had the opportunity to watch and row in the same regatta as New Zealand's world class oarsmen and women.

During their time with West End rowers would be hosted by families or if appropriate offered self-catering accommodation with others on the same journey. They hope to offer some work to allow rowers to earn some cash to help fund their trips and at the end of their time the rowers could stay on and work for a time to build up a travelling fund to help them see some of the wonderful sights and scenery that New Zealand has to offer.

I was fortunate enough to have the support of my parents to supplement the money I had earned during the summer and managed to get to a number of "must see" places. Paihai and the Bay of Islands, Cape Reinga, Rotorua and Hobbiton/Lord of The Rings Movie Set on the North Island and on the South Island after the Nat Champs, I travelled with them to visit Queenstown, had a Jet Boat trip on the Dart river, visited Milford Sound and flew back (a highlight) and walked up to the Franz Josef glacier. The end of their trip was in Christchurch, from where they flew back to the UK. I stayed on and travelled back to Auckland via Blenheim, Nelson and Wellington. From there I flew back to the UK via Melbourne, Sydney and Dubai.

David and Lisa were wonderful, friendly hosts. They made me feel at home, as would any host from the club I am sure and I had some great trips out with them and shared experiences.

The West End Club rowing experience has helped me appreciate that there is more to rowing than at school or university and I can only recommend the New Zealand West End experience to anyone thinking of taking that year out, not just to row, but to travel to an amazing country. Stay almost as long as you want within reason (visa), work to help fund your stay and have what could be your experience of a lifetime.

I will go back. Not yet but I will.

Try it or at least find out more.

Best of luck.

Dan