

PANGOLIN CREW LAUNCH

Hello and welcome and thank you for coming. I thought we could start with something very familiar to rowers - the first time back in the boat after it's been some time - looking around the room there are a few who have never had the pleasure, but it's been a while for most of us since we've taken those first strokes back on the water.

- First Strokes

I arrived in Johannesburg with absolutely no idea what a book launch is and it seems neither do any of my friends - I kept getting asked - so what happens at a book launch and I'd concede defeat and shrug my shoulders. Although consensus was that there should be some sort of reading, so at least I've managed to tick that box.

A look at the RSVP list for the event and it was amazing to see the spread of people that are here from every part of my rowing journey - I'm not sure everyone made it but it was great to see who wanted to come to this mysterious thing called a "book launch":

- Saints Rowers like Peter Dunnett and Simon Moore - Peter who's mom drove us out to the dam and patiently took me out in a double while Jamie coached. I kept stopping every time he told me something. Simon who I sat behind or in front of my entire 1st VIII season and who married a Girls College Rower Charlotte
- School Coaches like Jamie Croly and Luke Hartley - I never would have guessed that I'd return 15 years later to try and perform the roles you once did so admirably here at Saints.
- Rhodes University crew-mates like Andrew Craig who was a fine captain, president slash genius / hard man whose leadership allowed me the space to pursue my passion with confidence. Those happy Rhodes years are what inspired the novel. I'm most nervous for my Rhodes crew-mates' reviews given that most of them were either too nice (boring literature) or too gross (rowers have a bit of a reputation I'm afraid).
- I made the great decision to join Old Eds and row with athletes like Olympic Gold medallist Sizwe Ndlovu. Bruce Turvey wasn't able to make it - quite unbelievably his excuse is still the same: he can't, he has rowing.
- Wits Rowing mates in Simon Spooner, Steven Mattushek and Mike Marshall. Mike kindly managed to squeeze in a review of one of my earlier drafts

- Varsity rowing coaches like Sean Kerr who is president of Rowing South Africa for his sins and who continued to inspire us when I was “easily” lured in for one more Boat Race in the yellow and blue.
- Rhodes Rowing’s faithful alumni that generously supported us back in those days - Greg Vermaak, Justin Hagemann and Peter Glover. I was impressed by your interest in us, only to become the same - I still check in and love news of our beloved RURC.
- Some of my long suffering Rhodes digs mates and friends in Slotty, Mike, Sparky and Face. Nicknames were really a thing - you’ll see. Wonderful friends outside of rowing, left behind while we chased our dreams on the beautiful Kowie River, there to welcome us back from our battles and wars with warm dinner and a distraction from the grind.
- Long suffering rowing parents (including my own) who support their kids in this gruelling and uncompromising and beautiful sport. It was an obvious choice to dedicate the book to my mom and dad. None of it would have happened without them.
- Some of the athletes I coached like Sean Mare and Steve Randall. Steve later came back at my bidding (begging) and helped me when I returned to St Stithians to try help right the ship.
- Colleagues and bosses from St Stithians, Adrian Carter, David du Tout, Kim Urguhart. As a pupil I didn’t fully appreciate the care and consideration for the students here. Saints is a special place because of the beautiful grounds, but more so because of the people who work here.
- Girls College Rowers past and present in Sarah Hill and Shelby Schoeman. Even though I wasn’t your coach, I watched your growth and success with keen interest.
- Rowing family like my brothers Grahame and Piers who along with Dominic in Scotland have always been such a source of inspiration. People ask if I wrote a book to compete with Piers or if I’m aiming to sell more copies, but really I wrote the book because he showed me it is possible.
- And even a few faces I don’t recognise - perhaps here for the wonderful food and a free drink. Thank you so much for coming and for the support
- Finally I want to thank Alastair and the wonderful ladies that helped me put this together - Annie, Barbara, Caitlyn and Julia - Annie reminded me that I seem to have ticked all the boxes: pupil, employee, alumni and friend of St Stithians - tonight is thanks to ONE AND ALL.

I’ve been asked a few times - “So what is the process of writing the novel?” And I never really know where to begin. The beginning of the story was back in grade 10 - the year 2000. The beginning of writing was notes on my phone for the past decade. It’s tough, writing is freedom. It can be anything you want - I know that makes some people shiver - anything? But it’s quite

fun to just write what you want, when you want, how you want. As long as you can keep those doubts at bay. And as I've told the story of how Pangolin Crew came to be, I've seen an incredible, yet hidden parallel, between my story, Tommy's story and how this novel came to be written.

Rowing prepared me to write - the long training hours, the focus the discipline. The word focus comes up 66 times and I think Sizwe Ndlovu captured it brilliantly when he summed it up - "Rowing taught me discipline, focus and perseverance." And it does. Sure I got a degree and rowing is fun - well, when you're not on the brink of death - but Rowing has given me so much - even my wonderful non-rowing wife is somehow thanks to rowing. If you want any hope of making it in the sport you have to learn those three things among others, and master them. Not exactly easy lessons in a sport synonymous with incredible pain. So how did we do it? I know how I did it. I did it because there were eight other guys waiting for me. That was enough. I rowed PBs because I wanted us to win - I wanted to make a better contribution to my crew. The faster I was the faster we were. If one person can improve eight seconds personally the eight only goes one second faster. But I wanted to inspire my crew - break boundaries with them. And we did. And so I did.

A first person narration is a difficult thing, the perpetual use of I and me, but in a rowing book there was no danger - in a crew you're constantly saying we. We trained hard and we had fun and we did a bit of studying - occasionally. It got me thinking when I checked to see just how many times certain words were used and I found some gems:

"I" was used just over 3000 times - natural when giving a first person narration, but I'm sure "we" has to be some kind of record - 1800 times it was used. I looked further:

"Burn" - 43

"Focus" - 66

"Rhythm" - 52

Words synonymous with rowing

A reference to "training" - 120 times

And what we live for: "Race" - 257 times.

And then I wondered and cringed as I searched for one word. Any guesses?

"Beer" - 59 times. Saints being Saints, I remember some concerns were raised about what the book is really about. Concerns that it's based on my youthful experiences at Rhodes... but beer and other distractions and indulgences are a reality. Those temptations are there. I call it

“the *normal* student life”. Sure it starts out with a bang - the parties were wild and rowers have a lot of pent up energy after all of their early nights to bed, but hang in there. Take note of Tommy’s journey and where he finds joy and inspiration. And how it ends. In amongst all of it he surprises himself and hopefully you too.

It’s so difficult not to spoil the plot and I’m excited for you all to finally read it. I’m also terrified, but that’s where the magic happens I’ve learned. Speaking of terror, the end of my career here at Saints had me fleeing to Canada before my contract was up for fear for my wife’s health and safety. Mine too of course. The pandemic has been brutal - quite franky, 2020 was rough to say the least. But in amongst the chaos and doubt and fear I saw an opportunity. “A now or never” scenario - similar to the ones that Tommy and the Pangolin Crew discover. And I remembered something so cool:

Back cover - Each river is unique...

Pangolin Crew is a story about a confluence of 10 or 11 rivers. But I said it’s not a competition didn’t I? No the cool thing was the inscription:

Confluence Inscription

I was inspired by Piers, but I was also inspired by it all. I was inspired by all of you. It all came together. They call it synergy. And then as I wrote this, I thought: I know just how to finish:

- *When a boat clicks*