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Britons power planet

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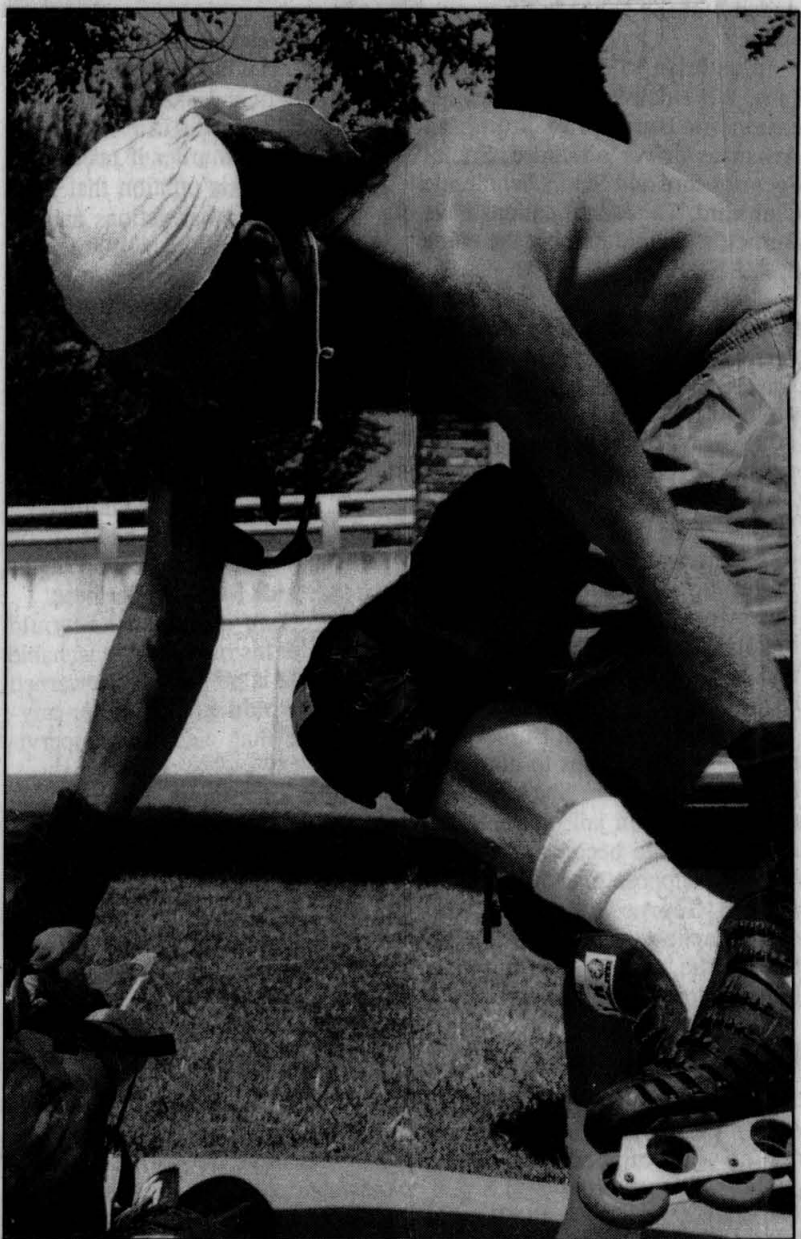
RUSSELLVILLE — Chunk it all — home, job, all the creature comforts one has become accustomed to — and hit the road to spread a message that will inspire, enrich and empower the minds of young people around the world.

And while one is at it, do it all under one's own power.

That's precisely what Jason Lewis of London, England, was doing when he took a breather: first, on Wednesday night with the families of Marty and Lisa Lynch and Steve and JeAnna Denton, all of Atkins; last, on Thursday afternoon when he took a couple of hours out of his transcontinental trip on rollerblades to stop in Russellville and discuss his world expedition.

Pedal for the Planet, the first human-powered round-the-world expedition, is being attempted by two young Britons: Lewis, 27, and Steve Smith, 28. They began their three-year marathon on July 12, 1994. The three-stage expedition

Please see BRITONS on page 6



THE COURIER / M.F. Sullivan
Jason Lewis stops in Russellville on his "world tour."

BRITONS

Continued from page 1

should end when the pair arrive home, hopefully, by mid-1998.

The purpose, aside from being an immense, personal challenge for the pair, is to visit schools worldwide, asking the same questions to youngsters ages 4-12 years. The Paris-based United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is assisting the men in producing and distributing an educational documentary of their conversations with young people around the world.

The former college roommates, both graduates of London University, departed London last July and traveled by mountain bike to the southern coast of England. The next day, they traversed the English Channel in a specially-built 26-foot-long, human-powered pedal boat, dubbed *Moksha*, and then spent the next six weeks biking through France, Spain and Portugal. Arriving at Lagos on the Portuguese Algarve, the pair readied their boat (which was trailered to the coast) for an epic 4,500-mile voyage across the Atlantic Ocean.

Fortified with five-year-old military dried food rations, vitamin supplements, about 5,000 Mars bars and a desalinator to produce fresh water from ocean water, the pair began their journey across the Atlantic to Miami, Fla.

When Lewis talks about the ocean trip, one can sense the hesitation he may have felt starting out.

"I was dreading it at first, really dreading it. I had never been to sea before. Steve had never really been to sea much either. We had done navigational courses, but we were really very green," Lewis said.

Equipped with a VHF radio and global positioning system (GPS), the pair were able to communicate only with ships within a 20-mile radius and obtain weather reports. The boat, built by the two college buddies at a cost of around \$35,000, was constructed to handle a 360-degree roll and upright itself. A sliding hatch was included to keep the bad weather out — but not an encounter with a whale.

"We were actually turned over about 3 o'clock one morning by a whale. We guess it was a whale. We didn't know if it was a shark, a submarine or what. But it kept coming back up and nudging the boat after a bit," Lewis said.

Another misfortune found the pair without a stitch of clothing — all swept overboard by a wave. When the duo arrived closer to the states, they were able to radio ahead to the Coast Guard, which offered them a pair of shorts and an escort into Miami.

How did the two young men deal with the countless number of hours spent on the ocean? First and foremost, they traded out on two-hour shifts pedaling the boat against the wind and rain.

"One of us had to paddle the boat, basically, all the time," Lewis said, "but even if we weren't paddling, the course we chose kept us going basically the correct direction. However, one of us had to be awake to watch for large ships, and if you're awake, you ought to be peddling. It was a very regimented lifestyle, but that's the only way you can deal with that type of situation."

Smith, an environmental scientist, began reading John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* on the trip. Lewis, who had been a musician playing in a band when he accepted Smith's invitation to join the expedition, spent his free time playing his guitar and writing poetry.

Lewis compared their submer-

lization cold turkey."

"You adjust to it after three or four weeks. Your mind is so used to lots of information coming in, that it begins to panic ... like 'I can't go switch on the TV or go to a movie — what am I going to do?' But you start to adapt to your environment."

Lewis, whose parents and two older sisters are back home in England, said the period spent onboard *Moksha* gave him time to reflect upon the importance of his family, and on the fact that people are actually far more important than money or a career.

"I think I am actually a better person for having had this wilderness experience. All my life, I've been used to having them (his family) there. After coming back into 'life,' you weed out all your bad habits," Lewis said.

Lewis and Smith spent Christmas Day onboard the U.S. Cable Ship *Charles L. Brown* at the skipper's invitation, foregoing a planned meal of dried mutton granules. The skipper also allowed them to use the ship's satellite telephone to call home.

After spending a total of 111 days at sea, Lewis and his partner decided to take alternate paths across the United States. Lewis said the friendship is intact but they spent "a long time on the ocean together, so we are taking different routes for awhile."

Smith is presently traveling by mountain bike through Texas to arrive at the pre-selected destination of San Francisco. They keep in touch through a contact in St. Petersburg, Fla., and through the Internet.

Unfolding a worn, tattered map of the world, Lewis said there is also a possibility Smith is considering a separate route to get to mainland China once they meet in San Francisco. Smith might bicycle to Alaska, get a kayak and cross the Yukon River and the Bering Sea, then travel by bike through Siberia. Lewis said Smith feels he has had enough of the ocean.

If the elder Briton chooses that route, the pair will "hitch up" in Hong Kong in early 1997 to continue their journey by bike across mainland China, central Asia, Eastern and Western Europe and across the United Kingdom, arriving home by mid-1998.

As for Lewis, he will go the Pacific crossing alone if Smith chooses the northern route. The possibility of making a single crossing doesn't phase him in the least.

Asked if he can do it alone, Lewis is quick to reply: "Certainly. You can do anything. That's the crux of the message we portray in the schools. You just have to be a bit more careful, you have to make sure you don't fall overboard. No one else is going to be there to bail you out. I'll have a rope tied around my foot, in case I would fall over. You think of the worst case scenario and plan for that."

Their boat is currently on display in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., but will be shipped to San Francisco.

From there, Lewis will cross to the Hawaiian islands, leaving California in time to avoid the typhoon season. He plans stopovers at Wake Island and the Marianna Islands before pushing on to China, estimating his Hong Kong arrival as late March or early April.

"If I peddled the whole thing flat, it would take nine months to cover the 1,200 miles," said Lewis.

Their route has changed a number of times, the original plan to go from west to east. The plan changed because they couldn't find a mainline sponsor, which is why they are in America now. The pair

has even gone into debt in the United Kingdom.

"Members of the general public have been great to donate. We have 1,200 names painted on the boat of people who have given \$20 to help sponsor this expedition. We update them every six months with a newsletter of where we are around the world. Lots of people from around the world have a stake in this expedition."

The Discovery Channel plans on interviewing the pair, possibly with a telecast in September, said Lewis.

Many possibilities for Lewis' life after the expedition were created through the school visits and the educational angles obtained during this trip. He had no interest in young people at all when he left college, concentrating on singing in a band and becoming a black belt karate instructor, he said.

"I did all that, and then you don't get fulfillment from that. It's like buying the latest car or the latest fad, it kind of fills in the cracks for a while, but then you want more. ... What we (Lewis and Smith) are searching for is some other type of value, other than money and materials to give us a longer lasting sense of fulfillment."

"I'd rather do one or two things well and focus more on the educational aspect," he said.

Because of limited financing, Lewis cooks most of his meals on a small cook stove he carries in a backpack. It presently weighs about 40 pounds.

Rice is a mainstay of his diet, though he admits, he doesn't really eat properly.

"I do try to have one good meal a day, but other than that, I just eat at a gas station. You can get these great little biscuits, two for a dollar. They're 'great,'" he said sarcastically.

"On the ocean, it was more important what you ate, but on land I just grab whatever I can. Once in three or four days I usually meet up with some folks. The people are very friendly around here. They are really impressive."

Lewis doesn't know anyone in the U.S., other than those he has met along the way. The families he met in Atkins treated him to his first venison, which was slow-broiled and served with potatoes the morning Lewis left. In exchange, the Englishman presented them with an autographed photograph of the boat he and Smith piloted across the Atlantic, thanking them for his first "road-kill breakfast."

"I don't really know anyone here, which is kind of exhausting sometimes. I don't know where I am going to sleep tonight. That has a kind of romantic appeal about it, but it is also exhausting. Sometimes you just get tired and wish you had somewhere you could just skate back to, my own books, my own music."

"I feel like Western society is kind of running itself into the ground, always discontented. There needs to be a kind of shifting consciousness. I think that if that's going to come about it has to start within people, with the young ones. I suppose that's where we're coming from. We're interested in different ways of thinking, and that's one reason why going to China and India will be so exciting, kinda juxtaposed against what we have seen so far."

Before leaving London, Lewis hadn't been on a bicycle since he was 16 years old. He said he could have been in better shape and was really sore for the first few days. Since then, though, he has become more physically fit, shedding some 15 pounds and adding to his body mass.

Lewis had been on skates seven times before starting out on rollerblades from Tallahassee, Fla., on July 22. This feat only illustrates the concept the young men want to teach youngsters — one only has to have the desire and belief in oneself to accomplish any task one undertakes.

His routine begins at 6 a.m. each day, when he takes off on skates, and continues until around 11 a.m., when he lies low, seeking relief

Pedal for the Planet has a home-page on the Internet. The address is [HTTP://WWW.TACH.NET/PUBLIC/ORGs/PEDAL/PEDALPLANET.HTML](http://www.tach.net/public/orgs/pedal/pedalplanet.html).

from the heat. Lewis said he replaces the wheels on his skates about every 300 to 400 miles. The brand he is wearing now are "Switch-its," which he physically restructures, or whittles away, to fit what he terms is a "club foot" he was born with. He spends about eight to nine hours a day on the skates. He rests until around 5 p.m., after which he begins skating again until he finds a place to stay.

Often, Lewis pitches his bedroll roadside or beside a stream, like he did recently near Helena. The young man spent a night in the White River — literally. Lewis was forced to sleep with only his head above water to stave off the fierce attack of mosquitoes, which he compared to kamikaze pilots.

"You have to believe in yourself and your abilities," he said. "Believing in oneself — that was my theory in just skating seven times and then deciding that I wanted to rollerblade across the states. If given enough time, and you really believe you can do something, then you can do it ... if you really want to do something, regardless of what your peers or your parents may say."

Lewis' parents were cynical at first, telling him there was no way that he was going to peddle across the Atlantic in a peddle boat. Now they are supportive, and he appreciates his parents more.

The hardest part for Lewis and Smith in preparing for the trip was cutting ties in London, leaving their jobs and their families for two years, Lewis said.

"It's the getting away that's the hardest. You don't realize how deeply rooted you are. It's kinda scary not knowing where you're going to sleep tonight, but it also keeps you fresh. After you have done all that, peddling across the Atlantic is a piece of cake."

A piece of cake? Maybe it will be for Jason Lewis.

And when he's finished, perhaps he'll decide that crossing the U.S. on rollerblades will be the frosting.