



CHRIS HARRIS



Pedal power: in 1994 Lewis, left, and his former partner, Smith, set out to circumnavigate the world under their own steam; right, arriving in the Bahamas after crossing the Atlantic by pedal-boat

Joining the dotty restores my faith

Oddly enough, it was the front page of *The Times* that cheered me up. I love three-day eventing above all sports, as regular readers of this space well know. The terrible run of fatal accidents this season has left me feeling like the sport itself: beyond merely devastated, now utterly bewildered.

And having read of the death of Simon Long at the Burghley Horse Trials last weekend, I turned idly to the front page, there to read about Jason Lewis.

Lewis, if you missed the story, has crossed the Atlantic in a pedal-boat, crossed the United States on rollerskates, pedal-boated on to Hawaii and thence to the Gilbert Islands. He aims to complete a man-powered circumnavigation of the globe around 2003.

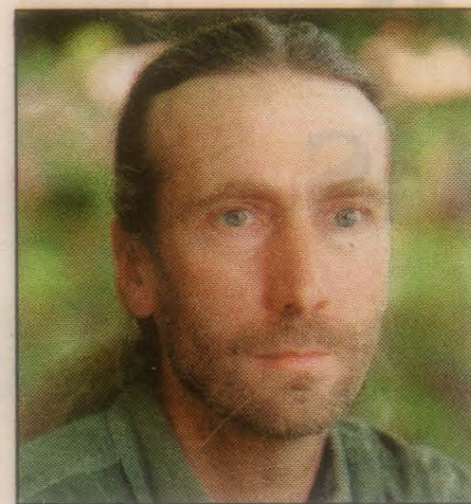
The sheer engaging dottiness of the business put a spring in my step at once. A leading article in the newspaper celebrated a classic example of "British eccentricity". We need the Lewises of this life. It is good to know that such people exist, have always existed, doubtless always will exist. It does our hearts good to hear about them.

And yet Lewis pedals and rollerskates his way around the world just a fag paper away from disaster. If we can filter out the dazzling daftness of the adventure, we see a man who is — as Mowgli put it in *The Jungle Book* — prepared to pull the whiskers of death.

Lewis spent some months in Colorado after he had had both legs broken by a car while roller-skating. He was lucky: in the United States only cars have human rights. And crossing the ocean in a pedalo leaves him open to all the usual cruel sea stuff.

This is a delightful and funny adventure; it is also lonely, dangerous and frightening. He had a partner on his journey until May: Steve

MIDWEEK VIEW



SIMON BARNES
Sports Feature Writer
of the Year

Smith decided to pull out when they got to Hawaii, calling the wooden boat a "rolling torture machine".

The bubbles would go out of the story if we were to read of some horror on the next leg. We would all hate that to happen, but we revel still more at the thought of Lewis going on: at once hilarious and a celebration of utter pointlessness. Lewis is a Samuel Beckett play all by himself. Lewis risks his life in a futile endeavour and our hearts go out to him. And — in something of the same way — I think we should celebrate the four lives lost in eventing, as well as grieve for them.

I remember my own first event with some precision. Especially I remember the ecstasy of the cross-country. There was a precipitously steep descent and I had planned to walk my horse down it. In the event, we took it flat out: I remember halfway down, shouting aloud the unprintable embellished phrase: "I must be mad!"

I was: out of my head with excitement. And most horse people, when asked why they take part in

risky pursuits, why they are involved with horses at all, would give the same answer, embellished or not according to taste.

But the notion of madness does not really help. It is a lazy explanation, partly because what it fails to explain is so damnably inexplicable. It seems there is a thirst for risk in all of us. We relish risk: sometimes personal risk, more often vicarious risk. In the African bush, after some mildly exciting encounter with an elephant, the guide is always asked the same question: "Were we in much danger?" It becomes the high point of the trip, the first story to be told on returning.

There is a yearning for wildness, for danger, for craziness. And — just as my colleague, Lynne Truss, wrote the other day — in modern life we tend to pay other people to do the living for us, walk our dogs, nurture our children.

And also we pay people to take our risks. The bravery of these people, their skill, their grace under pressure gives us something that is harder to find for ourselves in modern life.

Sport fills so many gaps for us, it gives us drama and mythology, hero and villain and story after story after story. We cannot resist the power of narrative. We are fabulists and sport, being fabulous, is our favourite fable.

Sport brings us adventure. Adventures are harder to find than they once were, that is why Lewis and his kind must go to extraordinary lengths to find a dragon to slay, a windmill to tilt at. Sport is our unending adventure story and risk — of reputation, of limb, of life — is one of the things that keep us turning the pages.

The lost quartet of eventers are certainly to be grieved for. But in their short courageous spans they have shown us courage and beauty and truth: and we need such people more with every passing day.

RICHARD AUSTIN

