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A PEDAL ODYSSEY

British eccentricity on the high seas

Anyone whose muscles are feeling stiff today after a weekend of excessive exercise should spare a thought for Jason Lewis. Mr Lewis has a dream: to be the first man to circumnavigate the globe powered by his own body. To rely on the combustion engine is heresy to this adventurer. For Mr Lewis is being propelled by forms of transport which most people use to whizz around city parks or potter around municipal lakes: the bicycle, rollerblades and the pedalo. His daring exploit, motivated by a wish to rediscover "direction in life", is a welcome display of British eccentricity and individualism.

This plucky Briton has the grit and determination of a Boy's Own character. He began his odyssey almost five years ago accompanied by a friend, Steve Smith. After they had pedalled across the Channel, cycled to Portugal, pedalled across the Atlantic, cycled and rollerbladed across America and pedalled to Hawaii, Mr Smith put his foot down and gave up.

Some might accuse Mr Smith of that most heinous of crimes, committed only by weaklings in adventure comics: quitting on a friend. But compared even to Mr Lewis's extraordinary stamina, Mr Smith showed remarkable endurance. On the second day of the expedition the "harsh realities" of life on a pedal-boat hit home. But he struggled on for almost five years. Only then did he

give up, bored with trundling on from week to week "like hamsters in a wheel", leaving Mr Lewis to face the loneliness of the long distance pedaller.

Yet should this intrepid Briton complete his epic journey, others may dispute whether this is proof that Britannia rules the waves. A Japanese man has already pedalled his way from Hawaii to Japan. Four years ago a French frogman swam the Atlantic dragging behind him a raft equipped with a fax machine. A few years earlier another Frenchman walked across to America on waterskis.

What motivates these adventurers will mystify most people. Like the Scottish pensioner who rode 208 miles dressed as a medieval knight, or the man who bounced on a pogo stick for seven hours, these men have set themselves strange objectives. While others strive for worldly riches or promotion at work, they are furiously swimming, pedalling, riding or bouncing in search of adventure, a sense of achievement, a moment of fame, a line in the record books. Their exertions entertain and fascinate the world, highlighting the drab conformity of conventional life. "The amount of eccentricity in a society", wrote J S Mill, "has been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour and moral courage it contained." Pedal hard, Mr Lewis.

IT BEGAN as a simple attempt to cross the oceans by pedalo. Five years later, an adventurer admits he is so lonely that he talks to fish.

Jason Lewis, 31, from Bridport, Dorset, is back in Britain gathering strength before completing the Pacific leg in his 26ft wooden pedal-craft *Moksha*. His odyssey started from the Greenwich Meridian in July, 1994, with a crew-

mate, Steve Smith, 32. They crossed the Atlantic to Florida in 111 days. Mr Lewis then roller-skated across America, stopping for several months in Colorado after his legs were broken by a car.

Mr Smith, who cycled across the US, rejoined him to pedal to Hawaii but then dropped out, leaving Mr Lewis to go solo to Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands, which he

reached in July. He will return next spring. His travels may finish in 2003. He may yet recruit a new crewman.

On his 73-day trip to Tarawa, he held conversations with two Dorado dolphinfish which accompanied the craft. He said: "Pedalling alone is enjoyable because there is more space on the boat."

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