

'I was scared I wouldn't make the start-line': How Sanita Puspure went from the verge of quitting to become a world champion

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WED, 02 JAN, 2019 - 00:00

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There have been so many twists and turns in Sanita Puspure's life, from the moment she quit rowing in Latvia to when she ruled the world in Bulgaria last summer. She has a feeling that fate played its part but a woman who once feared change has also learned to embrace it.

Even in deepest, darkest December, the Rowing Ireland headquarters presents an eagle-eye view of Inniscarra Lake's idyllic gloom, but Sanita Puspure isn't having any of it: "It looks beautiful out there but it's not."

The air chills, the water chops, it's windy as all hell and the early-morning darkness cloaks the punishment and self-doubt being endured as she travels backwards into a never-ending abyss. They row up to 27km per session – more than 13 races in one morning and with more work to come this afternoon. They're already three months into a pre-season spent in this so-called beautiful isolation, and many more months to go.

Sanita apologises, though. She's shivering despite her layers, shaking through her hoodie and padded jacket. It's a few degrees more survivable than those frosty mornings earlier last month and certainly warmer than the snow and ice she navigated as she trained through Christmas and her 37th birthday

back home in Latvia, but more than half-an-hour off the water and the lake's cool still hasn't thawed from her bones. "Sorry, I'm actually really cold."

She hated this training routine. She swore she'd never do it. It was too much. She said as much to herself, to her new coach, to everyone around her. But to get a different result, you have to do something different and this was something different. Something brutal, something scary, something insane, but definitely different.

She doesn't like changes, you see. She's suspicious of what they'll bring, especially having been thrown around over the years. Three coaches in the past three years alone. One not renewed after the Rio Olympics, the next dismissed just before Christmas 2017. Dave McGowan is the first to make it to New Year's since 2015.



But she'd held enough 'pity parties' for herself. Having to deal with that many unwanted changes has brought its own experience, equipped her with different tools from each coach. Toughness, technique, efficiency, independence. She parrots her coach's lines with a forced grin: "Winter miles make summer smiles." Fake it 'til you make it.

Make it she certainly did when, in the words of commentator Myles Dungan, she "humiliated a top-class field" to win gold at the World Rowing Championships in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, last September. Even with less drama, less stress this winter, the doubts remain. That feeling of creeping uncertainty endures. But that medal is one precious currency she can draw down on when times are tough.

"Remembering what happened this summer gives you a bit of a boost to get through the tough days. That's why we do it. Just for that 15 seconds of glory," she laughs.

It's hard work for a few races a year. It's a feeling I always get at this time of year. I feel similar enough now [compared to last year], not knowing where I am."

Even days before her World Championship victory, on the cusp of her best-ever regatta, Sanita had no idea she was in the form of her life. She sacrificed the European Championships for three more weeks of hard training. Frankly, she doubted she'd survive the workload.

"The training we did was quite brutal so we knew if we came out in one piece, we'd be much faster than we were during the season."

If? Was survival in doubt?

"Half the camp I was actually scared I wouldn't make it to the start-line. It was because I didn't know what this programme is and I've never done that type of preparation before. It was unknown and it was scary at times."

How did you gather the belief to keep going?

"I didn't. It was just survive one session at a time and get to the next day. "It was as simple as that. There was no magic."

Winter miles make summer smiles

Before Sanita Puspure was an Irish rower, and long before she was a world champion, she was a child of Soviet-Union Latvia. All she remembers of that era is Russian TV being on all the time. "News announcements, Russian cartoons, all that kind of stuff. It was different. There's still quite a lot of that influence from the past."



One day in 1996, a teenage Sanita was picked out of her gym class, along with all the other tall girls, to try rowing, or kayaking as she thought it was at the time. Her first coach was just setting up and they were 'the first litter'.

"I never left really," she says.

Well, that would be true only for life intervening. Too much work and not enough money was her conundrum. She left university where she was studying to become a coach and PE teacher: "I didn't finish because I was too busy rowing, ironically." She worked two jobs, joining the police force and filling her weekends as a hotel receptionist. There just weren't enough hours in the week for the World Student Games gold medallist to keep rowing, unless she were to give up on sleep altogether.

There were so many twists and turns of chance that steered her from there to here, in between the relentless hard work, that there could be a touch of fate to it. For Sanita and for Ireland.

She could've gone to university in America, having worked so hard to get the necessary transfer credit points, but her boyfriend, now husband, Kaspar didn't get a visa so she returned home.

She could've gone to Britain, as they planned to, but it didn't work out and her uncle in Dublin offered a room, rent-free, to help them get started. They were in Ireland within the week.

Even then, she might never have rowed again but for taking a wrong turn on her way to Dublin Zoo in 2006 and being inspired by the boats on the Liffey at Islandbridge.

"It's ridiculous. If we had Google Maps, we probably wouldn't be rowing. If you start looking at it that way, it's like it must be fate! It was like a chain reaction for me."

Where would she be now if not for the US visa system, if not for her uncle's spare room, if not for the want of a map or better signposting?

"Probably four kids already," she jokes. "It's hard to tell, we'll just never find out."

There were the usual comments from the malcontents after she decided to represent her adopted country in 2010.

'Traitor!'

'Sure she had no potential, that's why she left.'

But she bit her tongue and vowed to prove the difference between keyboard warriors and actual warriors. Warriors like her sister, Inese, whose cancer diagnosis made 2017 all the harder, but continues to fight every day.

"We had a really tough year. We had two bereavements at home and my sister got her diagnosis, so it was really emotionally tough.

"That was one of the reasons we travelled for Christmas last year. That was shortly after we got the diagnosis and it looked really grim. But she's just kicking it at the moment. It was really upsetting but we tried to make the most of it last year and hopefully it won't be as sad this year."

One team, one dream

Life on the water has rarely been plain sculling for Sanita and there have been dark moments along the way. No more so than the last Olympics in Rio. "I'm never going to an Olympics again," she vowed after her old foe, the wind, and an unkind draw conspired against her.

"I was so upset, God!" she reflects now when reminded of that promise, although it was Kaspar who soon convinced her to reconsider: 'You can't leave like this. You wouldn't.'



Gold medallist Sanita Puspure with her husband Kaspar, daughter Dani, aged 10 and son Patrick, aged 11, on her return from the World Rowing Championships at Dublin Airport. Picture: David Fitzgerald/Sportsfile

While coaches have changed, and those changes inevitably led to more changes, Kaspar has been the constant. He was there for the big move to Ireland and there when she picked up an oar once again. He was there when the recession left both of them out of work and there when there was close to nothing in the fridge to feed their two kids. He was there to be persuaded to move nearer the National Rowing Centre in Cork and there when she vowed to pack it all in after Rio. And he was there when it all paid off in Plovdiv two years later.

“We’ve had ups and downs. Sometimes I wonder how he stuck with me when I got back into the sport. He was the one who encouraged me and I had to remind him [of that] sometimes. It got really tough where financially we were on the edge. Even he didn’t realise in a way how much it takes to be an elite athlete. It took years of gradually accepting things.

“He still doesn’t ring me, though, when I’m away,” she adds mischievously. “We never talk, we just text... He just doesn’t like talking on the phone when I’m away. That’s his way of dealing with it.

“Rio was as upsetting for him as it was for me. I was really close to quitting. I did struggle with motivation for a little bit, although I was back training very soon. I don’t know why I was training, maybe off the frustration of failing at the Olympics. Mentally I probably needed time to recover, regroup and go again. But on the flight home I already knew I wasn’t going to leave it there. It’s a longer process getting over the massive upsets but yeah, I’m glad I didn’t [quit].”



There's been more split-second setbacks to endure than you can possibly mention. Her funding was halved entering 2018, she notes, all because of 35 hundredths of a second in one race. The difference between €40,000 and €20,000. The difference between a World Championship medal and fourth. A result which would've been reversed were the race a few metres longer.

She owes much to the team for not letting her get down about it all. She's seen many rowers come and go in her eight years at Inniscarra, and seen a nation go from a footnote to world-beaters in that time.

Were it not for the team that's blossomed around her, she doubts she'd be where she is today. Her Ireland team-mates have endured the same early mornings, the same cold and pain, the same hopes and fears.

"During the summer we were almost carrying each other. When someone was down, you'll be pulled along no matter what and that meant so much even in preparation for the worlds. If I trained on my own, I don't know if I'd have made it.

"If I'm down I can go and talk to the girls. They'll probably say, 'What're you on about? You've got medals already. Why are you worried?' But at the same time, you're still a human. You still need someone to tell you it'll be okay.

"We know how hard we work during the winter and sometimes it's easier to tell somebody it'll be okay than it is to tell yourself. It's as simple as saying, 'It's going to be fine.' Okay, if you say so, and then you move on. It's a little team within a team. Because I'm in the single, I'll always look for a little more from the team."

She needed a chink of light after the summer's slog and it came when she watched her teammates, Aifric Keogh and Emily Hegarty, perform above and beyond all previous showings in their heat. Then they

blitzed their semi-final in first place too. She'd paced them, raced them and if they were flying, why not her too?

Self-belief swelled like a wave. That first day on the water felt easier than any training session. She rowed the distance at her desired pace in relative comfort. She lay down a marker, winning her heat by 14 seconds and five seconds faster than any other heat. Even easing up to a seven-second victory next race out, she was faster than all boats in the more competitive second semi-final.

This was no weak field either. The woman she beat into second in the final, Jeannine Gmelin, had been unbeaten in her major international races through 2017 and 2018. Every heat, quarter, semi and final. 22 races without defeat, seven gold medals and the 2017 World Rowing Female Crew of the Year award to boot. But Sanita was training harder and inching closer all the while.

She didn't just edge Gmelin into second either, she won by six seconds. 90 seconds and 400 metres into the 2km race, the commentators had called it off: "It's Puspure's race to lose." Her plan was to get in front and hold Gmelin off, but this was already a race for silver.

*It's gold for Ireland and Sanita Puspure at the World Rowing Championships.
This was a dominant performance in the women's single sculls
final. #RTESport pic.twitter.com/HIOS6kjEpQ*

— RTÉ Sport (@RTESport) *September 16, 2018*

"At the end, I saw everybody crying and that's like, 'Oh, they're so happy for me! You can't even put it into words. I had tears when the boys [Gary and Paul O'Donovan] won and I hadn't even seen them training so much. It's just that I know they're part of the team. It's hard to describe. One team, one dream, I suppose. It was really good to have family and kids there. It was like a fairytale ending to the season."

There may have been trolls but her victories are certainly celebrated in Latvia too. Her first coach cried tears of joy when she heard the news of Sanita's win in Plovdiv. The media reported the 'fantastiski' victory. Friends edit Latvian flags into her winning picture. Shane Ross's 'Dominant Puspure' blunder was discussed on Latvian state television.

The support in Ballincollig and beyond has been wonderful too. She's felt it upon her homecoming, on those school visits, at award ceremonies, from her club, Old Collegians, and in all the messages of support from all across Ireland. "Because I come from a different country, it makes me feel more accepted here

that so many people support me, not even speaking about the rowing community – they’ve been amazing. It means the world.”



There’s support from everyone except those with money – sponsors. She’s represented by Sport Endorse but Ireland’s world champion remains without any extra financial backing heading into 2019. “We won without sponsorships but it would make a massive difference in terms of not worrying about equipment. If you need something, you know you can get it. There’s quite a lot of fees we’ve to pay over the year too. We’ve got so far without it, so if we get someone, great; if not, we’ll keep moving on.”

She’s watched that race back a couple of times, of course. “First, I was watching it more because I couldn’t believe I did it. Now, [I watch it] sometimes if I feel down. The one thing we haven’t done is coldly analyse the technique to see the small improvements we can do for next year.

“I wasn’t hoping to make such big jumps when I joined the new programme in February. It hasn’t even been a year but because it was so different, I got massive physiological benefit out of it. Thank God it worked, because otherwise I wouldn’t want to do that programme.”

She’s conquered the world, so why keep punishing herself? Well, how about betraying that 2016 vow: “I’m never going to an Olympics again!” Tokyo 2020 will “most likely” be her last rodeo. Her only promise is to do it all again, but do it all different.