

Scott Durant lifts his arms after winning gold in the Men's Eight rowing race at the 2016 Rio Olympics. The Great Britain team covered 2,000 meters on the water in 5 minutes and 29 seconds, edging out Germany, the silver medalists, by roughly one second.



Durant Durant

AT 28, SCOTT DURANT JOINED BRUNSWICK Group as a junior researcher, an entry-level position typically offered to recent college graduates.

But if Scott hadn't spent his twenties climbing a corporate ladder, he had a solid alibi. "I'd spent the last 14 years rowing," he says. And he had an Olympic gold medal to show for it, earned as part of the British Men's Eight in Rio in 2016.

Reaching the podium in Rio was the culmination of a dream that had bordered on obsession. Yet when the moment arrived for Scott, something was missing – his identical twin brother, Mason. They had entered the sport together at age 14. At home each night they had talked about training and competing strategies. They had shared a tattered copy of the autobiography of Sir Matthew Pinsent, a British rower who won four Olympic gold medals. They went so far together that both earned a spot on the British national rowing team. Then a back

After growing up sharing a love of rowing with his twin brother, Brunswick's **SCOTT DURANT** found himself alone on the Olympic podium in Rio.

injury ended Mason's rowing career. "I always kind of thought that if I made it, we both would make it," says Scott. Instead, he wound up going to Rio with the British Men's Eight alone. "Naturally, I was very pleased for him," Mason says.

The pursuit of an Olympic career is largely solitary, even in a team sport such as rowing and even among twins. Scott describes his 14 years of training as a relentless effort to close the gap between his performance and his potential. "There was always someone who was better than me," he says. "I would rather try and beat my own personal bests than focus on beating others."

When they started rowing, Scott and Mason didn't stand out. "I was never particularly good at sports as a kid, wasn't someone expected to win a gold medal at the Rio Olympics. As an underweight, frankly weak and fairly soft 14-year-old boy, I was below average in every respect and failed to make my school's top boat in my first two years of the

sport,” Scott says. “In my first national rowing competition at age 15, my team finished fourth from last, out of 50 crews.”

But the twins persevered. “When we were 16 or 17, we realized that the more we put into it, the more we got out of it,” says Mason.

“All I ever thought about was rowing,” Scott says. “During school lessons I would plan how I was going to structure my next 2,000-meter indoor rowing test. I would daydream about what it must be like to row for Great Britain. I barely allowed myself to think past the goal of making the national team. The Olympics? The British Men’s Eight had won only one Olympic gold medal since 1912.”

To Scott that obsession was a blessing. “I felt lucky that I knew exactly what I wanted, something many of my close peers are yet to resolve,” he says. “A big part of this dream was having short-term goals. I was constantly trying to increase the distance I could row in 20 minutes on the rowing machine.”

His second year at Oxford Brookes, Scott made the first team, after placing only the third team in the first year. “In five years at Oxford Brookes, I obtained undergraduate and graduate degrees in town planning while training six days a week, once or twice a day, for an average of three hours a day. By the end, I had rowed in boats that had won a lot of races at a student level.”

Mason and Scott still shared the dream of making the national team. Even though they rowed for separate universities, they won first place together in a boat at the prestigious Henley Royal Regatta race in 2012. “That was quite a big win, and doing it together added an extra level,” says Scott.

In 2009, a back injury nearly ended Scott’s career, besieging him with spasms that rendered him immobile. Eighteen months of physical therapy convinced him to train his entire body, especially his core. “If all you do is row, along with strength training that targets muscles needed for rowing, your body falls out of balance,” he says.

After college graduation, the boys worked together at the Oxford Brookes University sports center and trained together. Eventually, both made the national team, which provided a cost-of-living stipend. But their greatest source of support was their mother, Diane Durant, a teaching assistant and learning mentor in a local primary school. Their father died when the boys were 9, after a long illness that had left him incapacitated. Their mother was left a widow.

“I saw a lot of people around me who weren’t as well supported as Scott and I, in terms of the

emotional and financial support our mother provided,” Mason says. “They didn’t carry on rowing as long as Scott and I did. We were lucky to have that support.”

“I have always done my utmost to support all my boys in whatever they have been passionate about and set their minds to,” Diane says. “For Scott and Mason, this was their rowing. They trained together throughout their time at school, culminating in them winning the National Schools Championship in the pair and beginning to row for their country. It was at this point that they were interviewed for our local newspaper, stating that a dream for them both would be to row in the Olympics.”



Scott and brother Mason in a “coxless pair,” a vessel that requires a great deal of teamwork between two rowers in order to power and steer the boat. The photo was taken by their mother, Diane, in 2006 – a decade before Scott would row his way to a gold medal.

The first couple of years on the national team were exciting. “Because the position came with a stipend, that meant I didn’t have to work or seek help from my ever-supportive mother,” Scott says. But another back problem flared up for Scott in 2014, causing him to miss practices. “After returning I couldn’t find my previous form, and I ended up in a boat at the World Championships that, if it had been 2016, would not have gone to the Olympics. Mentally, I found this very hard. It was one of the first times I had not achieved something due to underperformance.

“It felt like a failure, but it came at the right time. I was able to assess what had gone wrong and rectify that in time for Rio. It taught me things were never set in stone and that your situation can change at the drop of a hat. It showed that I was going to have to get everything right in the lead up to the Olympics.”

That same year, Mason received the career-ending news of a broken vertebra in his spine – a rowing-related stress fracture. “It was devastating for Mason to have to give up rowing, and as his mother, it was utterly heartbreaking to see this huge disappointment for him,” Diane Durant says.



Barely 18 months away from the Rio Olympics, Scott felt the pressure on him increasing. One bad performance could sink him. “On the national team, if you’re not good enough, they kick you out. I have been there when teammates have been told that they are to go home and not return, and it’s terrible. You wouldn’t wish it on your worst enemy. This pressure, and the fact that there are several athletes going for only a few seats, has the ability to break people.”

But Scott found within himself what might be called a separate peace. “I had already made the decision that 2016 was to be my last year of rowing, and now I was determined for the experience to be enjoyable. I knew it would be brutally hard. But just because something is hard, does not mean it is not fun. I intended to leave out all of the miserable thoughts of things I couldn’t control, and focus on the things I could control.”

Only three weeks before the Rio Games, Scott was notified by the national team that he had made the Olympic Men’s Eight. Both his girlfriend and his mother made plans to travel to Rio, as did Louise Charlton, his aunt and a founder of Brunswick. “He had worked so hard for this,” says Charlton.

The Great Britain team rows in their first heat during the 2016 Rio Olympics. Scott Durant sits in the seat furthest from the camera – “the bow,” or the “one-seat” in an eight-person boat. The bow isn’t the most powerful rower – they usually sit in the middle of the boat – nor are they the one who sets the pace – that’s the “stroke,” at the stern, shown here second from right. The bow is typically light, and from that position, the rower is able to see all other rowers and call out if they see any issues with form or timing.

One person not heading to Rio was Mason. The Olympics took place during a cycling trip across Europe that Mason had long planned with his girlfriend. “I rowed pretty much every single day of my life for 14 years, so when that career came to an end, I had to put that behind me,” says Mason.

That trip ended just ahead of the medal round for the Men’s Eight in Rio. Boarding a homebound plane in Slovenia, Mason had to shut off his phone just as his brother’s race began. He said he expected Team GB to win, even though they hadn’t finished first in any big races all year. “I spoke to Scott during that entire season, and from what he was saying, I thought they were the favorites,” says Mason.

Scott recalled the taut moment, crouched in a boat at the start line for several minutes before the race began. “It feels like you’re sitting on a box with a caged animal inside,” he says. “You can’t let it out until the right second.”

Great Britain won. “The feeling was indescribable,” Scott says. “I would sway between a state of complete euphoria and being on the verge of tears.”

Witnessing that victory thrilled Diane Durant. “To actually realize a dream takes a certain kind of

dedication, commitment and incredible hard work and single-mindedness that not everyone possesses,” she says. “That feeling of sheer pride and admiration for one’s offspring is overwhelming and amazing, and makes me feel privileged to be their mother.”

For Scott, euphoria quickly gave way to what he calls “a sense of emptiness.”

“My teammates felt it too,” he says. “No longer did we need to train toward perfection, sweating over the smallest detail. The regimented and planned timetable of training no longer existed. We were all free.”

“A teammate described the feeling as ‘an alien sense of freedom, tinged with loss.’ Half of my brain

was telling me to get up and train at 7:30 a.m. The other half was telling it to shut up and go out and celebrate.”

As the internal struggle subsided, Scott saw he needed to move on, to find the next challenge. After starting in December at Brunswick, Scott found himself seeking professional advice from Mason, who is now three years into his career as a water-management scientist.

Mason couldn’t be happier to field those calls. “Our relationship has always been one where we try to help each other out,” he says.

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KEVIN HELLIKER is Editor of the Brunswick Review, and based in New York.

CRISPY CHICKEN. INDONESIAN CURRY. SIDES of garlic bread and sweet potato fries. We’re moving glasses and plates to accommodate Alistair and Jonny Brownlee’s post-training dinner. “We try to eat a healthy, balanced diet on the whole,” says Alistair. “But you spend your life training, so you’ve got to enjoy food.”

In their native Yorkshire, where they still do much of their 35 hours-a-week of training, the brothers are local heroes. But if these two Olympic medalists – among the world’s best triathletes – walked past, you probably wouldn’t notice them. Six foot tall, wiry and boyish, they arrive in their matching puffa jackets and tracksuits, stopping briefly to say hello to some people they know at the next table.

“We get recognized much more since Mexico,” the 2016 Cozumel triathlon where Alistair famously had to haul Jonny over the last few meters of the course as his legs gave way, leaving him looking like “a wobbly horse” – a video viewed hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube. “Every few days I cross the street now and get people saying, ‘Make sure you drink lots of water.’ I’m quite embarrassed by the whole thing. To get more recognition for losing a race than your Olympic medal, is really weird.”

The brothers are deeply connected to Yorkshire. Many of their training partners have been friends since they were teenagers. Jonny goes to their parents’ house for a roast dinner every Sunday. Their third brother, Ed, a veterinary student, can always be relied on to bring the Olympians down to earth: “He doesn’t care about triathlon at all. He could have come to Rio to watch us, but he didn’t want to.”

In an era of peripatetic athletes and footloose sports franchises, that ordinariness is part of the Brownlees’ appeal – and the counterpoint to their extraordinary achievements. At 29, Alistair has won

BROTHERS in arms

Brunswick’s **JAMES HALLAM** and **CHARLIE BOOTH** dined with superstar triathletes **ALISTAIR** and **JONNY BROWNLEE**. In a wide-ranging conversation, the brothers discussed being training partners – and each other’s toughest competitor

triathlon gold in the last two Olympics and has twice been world champion. Jonny, younger by two years, has a world title of his own and followed up bronze in London 2012 with silver in Rio 2016.

Their capacity for endurance is remarkable. In the 2012 Olympic race, Alistair finished the 10 kilometer run in 29 minutes 7 seconds. That was only 96 seconds slower than Mo Farrah’s time, who won Olympic gold for running the same distance on the track; Brownlee did it having already completed a 1,500 meter swim and 43 km bike ride.

The training required to reach this level is predictably brutal. In addition to gym and physio sessions, they swim 20 to 25 km, cycle 500 to 700 km, and run 120 km or more every week.

While modern sports stars surround themselves with advisers, agents and coaches, the Brownlees have bucked the trend, taking responsibility for their training and race-day performance.

“I want to be stood on the start line knowing I’m completely responsible for what goes right or wrong,” says Jonny. “I’m not saying I don’t have a team – I’ve got the support of four or five people who I rely on.”



Alistair continues: “You treat coaching as advice, then you sit there and you make the decision.”

That responsibility is evident even in how they approach the night before a big race. Many athletes try to eat exactly the same meal every time – it’s part of a routine, another decision they don’t have to make, perhaps even a psychological crutch. The Brownlees don’t. Their logic: as long as you eat well and don’t get sick, eating a specific thing isn’t essential for performance. If you think you can only run on one particular meal, what happens when you forget to bring it to a race 3,000 miles away?

The same is true of superstitions in general. “When you’ve raced as long as we have and in as many different places, superstitions tend to fall by the wayside, because they never work out very well.”

They’ve stuck to a similar routine since childhood, a schedule originally based on Alistair’s school timetable. While having a familiar routine helps ensure you get out of bed in the morning to train (“If you give yourself an option, you’re in trouble...”) novelty and variation are also vital. “I get the impression that we enjoy our training a lot more than most people,” says Jonny. That means

Jonny Brownlee (center), severely dehydrated, staggers across the finish line of a 2016 race in Cozumel, Mexico, with help from his older brother Alastair, who gave up his chance to win the race to support Jonny down the finishing chute. The story, and accompanying video footage, received global media coverage. Jonny says that when he’s out walking in his hometown, people still playfully remind him to stay hydrated.

keeping things fresh with new training routes, and using longer loops rather than short, repetitive circuits. “You’d be amazed. Some people say it’s not really training unless it’s boring,” says Alistair. “I’ve had this argument with coaches, who say there has to be a certain type of monotony to training, so that you’re almost training your brain too. They see it as a kind of psychological weakness to try to avoid that kind of monotony. My response is that I think it’s a psychological inadequacy to need that monotony, and not to realize that doing exactly the same physiological training has exactly the same benefits without being boring.”

Both love what they do. But how do they find training, racing and, until recently, living together? “I think we’ve been very lucky that, on the whole, us working as a team has been advantageous,” says Alistair. “You want to train with the best people to push you on, so even if he wasn’t my brother it would be fantastic to be able to train like we do.”

But the brotherly affection belies a steely, ruthless streak, as the world saw in the 2016 Olympic race in Rio de Janeiro. Leading the race halfway through the final run, Jonny turned to Alistair and urged him to

“relax.” Alistair did anything but, streaking away to win his second Olympic gold. “We work together as a team until we get onto the run. And then it’s every man for himself.”

For Jonny, training alongside his brother every day has been more of a mixed blessing. He speaks warmly about the comfort of lining up alongside his brother on the pontoon at the start of a race, but also reflects on the mental challenge of competing against the best in the world day-in, day-out: “He’s your older brother and he beats you in training, so maybe you go into a race half beaten.”

While they may be considered a pair by their competitors, sponsors and the media, the differences in their personalities become clear throughout our dinner. Alistair, the older brother, is quietly reflective. His approach is rational and hard-headed. At 18, he gave up a place reading medicine at Cambridge University in favor of triathlons, but when asked about the sacrifices he’s made in his life, he seems almost nonplussed: “It’s a choice you have to make to do what you want to do. I’ve never ever had to pore over a decision about seeing friends or doing a family thing – if it’s been for my sport, I’ve always just chosen sport. If you saw it as a sacrifice, you just wouldn’t do it.”

Jonny is bubbly, quicker to laugh and crack jokes, poking fun at his brother’s love of romantic comedies: “Living alone I can do what I want, like watching Leeds Rhinos or Leeds United on telly, rather than sitting getting bored watching ‘Bridget Jones’ Diary’ and wondering if I should be doing some stretching.”

Living alone, near their parents and each other, the pair recognize the importance of separating training from life, giving themselves time to switch off after a hard day. Jonny says, “It’s something we’ve got wrong in the past. You’ve obviously got your training, but you’ve also got all your commercial stuff on top and you end up being very, very busy.”

The brothers rely on triggers to mark the end of their training day and the beginning of their evening. Alistair: “As an athlete – and it’s the same as a CEO of a company – it could literally never stop. But usually if I sit down and have a glass of wine, that’s the end of the day.”

New challenges are coming in 2017. For the first time in years, they won’t be competing alongside one another. While Jonny continues racing at the Olympic distance in World Series events, Alistair will compete in the longer half-Ironman – a 1.2-mile (1.9 km) swim, a 56-mile (90 km) bike ride, and a 13.1-mile (21.1 km) run.

“Ninety-five percent of our training is still together, we just don’t do as many runs together,” says Alistair. But the change marks a psychological fresh start for both brothers. For Jonny, it’s a big opportunity: “I’m excited, definitely. I hope it gives me chance to win something!”

Alistair will step into the unknown in September, when he expects to compete in his first half Iron Man event. Does he think he can win the longer distance at his first attempt, or is this first run about setting a benchmark?

“Nah, he thinks he can win it!” interjects Jonny.

“I think I can win,” Alistair agrees. “I probably wouldn’t be doing it if I didn’t.”



Alistair Brownlee (right) and younger brother Jonny became the first brothers to win Olympic gold and silver medals in the same event since 1960. Here, they stand on the medal podium in Fort Copacabana, Brazil, after taking the top two spot at the Men’s Triathlon race in the 2016 Summer Olympics.

The brothers still have several years of racing ahead, but they have begun to think about life beyond triathlon. Both will seek a second career. For Alistair, that could mean a break from sport. “I’d like to at least try and succeed in something totally different and then come back to sport. I’d never go too far away from it. But I can’t see myself going into coaching.” Jonny talks about growing the Brownlee Foundation, the brothers’ charity that encourages young people across the UK to get into sport. “This year we’re going to have about 5,000 kids doing a triathlon. Hopefully in the future we can get 20 or 30 thousand. And then I’d also love to have a Leeds United season ticket.”

And with that we call it a night. The brothers, matching puffer jackets back on, stop briefly to say goodnight to the group of girls at the next table before disappearing out into the Leeds night.

It’s past 9 o’clock and they have a hard swim session at 7:45 the next morning.

JAMES HALLAM is a Director in Brunswick Insight, specializing in opinion research and stakeholder engagement. **CHARLIE BOOTH** is an Associate with Brunswick. Both are based in London.