

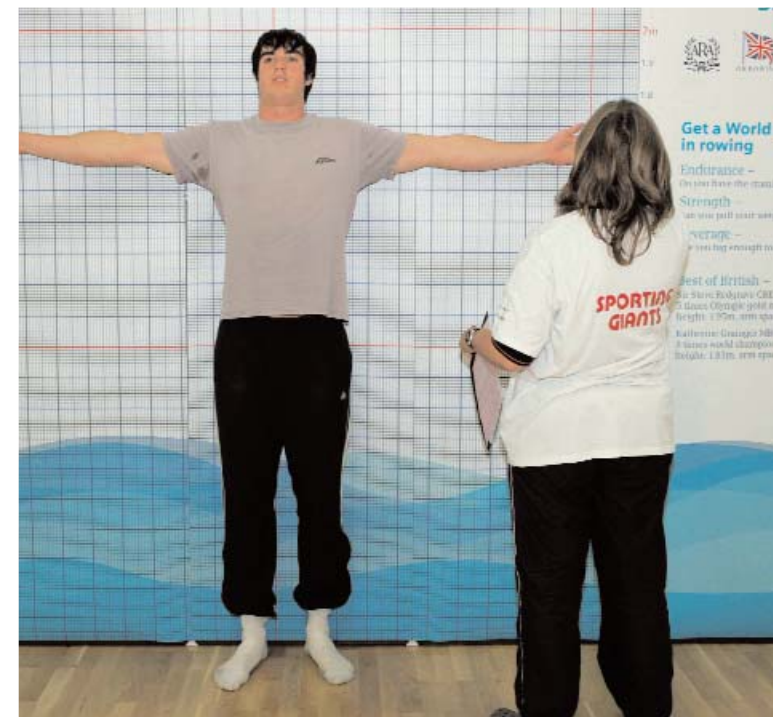
Giant Talent

When UK Sport put out a national call for tall people who might have Olympic potential in volleyball, handball and rowing, the response was huge. So how are the talented athletes identified and what goes on behind-the-scenes at the rowing assessment sessions?

Words: Peter Crush
Photos: Phil Searle



SIEMENS The ARA's World Class Start programme is sponsored by Siemens



It's not every day you think you might be looking at the next Steve Redgrave or Sarah Winckless. And yet, as I wander around a fairly ordinary gym at Bath University's Sports Training Village, I soon realise that nothing is quite as normal as it seems. I'm surrounded by hundreds of youngsters, all puffing and panting, being put through their paces on spin machines and ergos, all with one thing in mind: to be spotted as – just perhaps – the next big, undiscovered talent.

The day – organised by Paul Stannard from the ARA's World Class Start programme, sponsored by Siemens, and supported by UK Sport's 'Sporting Giants' project – is the third leg of a five-city summer tour to uncover new, otherwise undiscovered, rowing talent. It's a sort of rowing *X-Factor*, with 'giants' being the operative word.

The main criteria for anyone coming today is that girls have to be a minimum of six feet tall, while boys must be 6'3". Olympic wannabes have to be no older than 22 for boys and 25 for girls, although they can be as young as 16. All will be tested in exactly the same way, including how much they weigh, how high they can jump, and what their height:span ratios are. If it wasn't the 21st century, you could be excused for thinking this was some sort of pernicious 'master race' selection school – although essentially this isn't too far from the truth.

Today, about 200 are braving the critical eye of the Simon Cowell of GB talent ID selection – Peter Shakespear, ARA

performance development manager. Under the supervision of the World Class Start team, the candidates have already survived one stage of sifting – based purely on their online applications. Today is when it gets serious. By the end of the day maybe none, or just a couple of people, will be picked to go forward.

It's tense, and everyone wants to do their best. Zoe Stickley, 22, who works at a leisure centre in Bournemouth is one of the first people to finish her tests, and says she is already "nervously waiting for her acceptance or rejection letter," which won't arrive for another six weeks. Standing 6'1" and with an impressive sporting background (she's a former county-level swimmer, and runs for Poole Runners) she could well be picked, but this is a room brimming with potential, and Shakespear knows it.

"In the five weeks we'll have been on the road for I will have seen more people of the right height and with the right combination of potential physical attributes than I will have done in five years," says an excited Shakespear. "This is a real opportunity to spot youngsters that would have otherwise slipped under the radar. We want to turn bronze medals into golds, and the only way to do this is to lose the accidentalness that had tended to characterise the unearthing of great rowing talent. This is a deliberate and purposeful event aimed specifically at finding real potential athletes."

Shakespear knows what he's talking about. As a former Australian Olympian-

CASE STUDY

NAME: Pete Bidewell
AGE: 16
HEIGHT: 6'4"
LIVES: Maidstone



For 16-year-old Pete Bidewell, today's trials are something he will be getting used to. The student, about to start his A-Levels, is also trialling for the British American Football Squad. However, he says that if the World Class Start selectors give him the nod, it'll be rowing that he'll chose. "The testers have already told me that I'm among the top three they've seen all day," he says. "I did 927m in my three-minute ergo, and I also reached 95rpm on the spin bikes, and the target was 100. All of this makes me hopeful of selection. I've also just joined Maidstone Rowing Club to get myself familiar with the rowing action, and using the ergos."

“All the tests are designed to put the athletes under pressure. Even the ergo test is designed to freak them out mentally...”

turned-coach of the Australian Women's Rowing Squad, he became disillusioned with the methods for finding athletes in the early 1980s. He spent five years working out which tests would accurately predict the best physical and mental attributes of elite rowers at a young age. By the time he left, 60 per cent of the Australian Women's team had been so-called "talent ID'd" – that is, spotted early according to their physical and mental potential.

"All the tests today are designed to put the kids under pressure," he adds. "Even the ergo test – a physical three-minute, 24 rate-capped piece – is designed to freak them out mentally as well," he says. "The ergos are positioned in a semi-circle so everyone can see each other. They're also placed in front of the parents' gallery, so again, they are feeling the pressure of having spectators watch them."

But there is one thing he wants to make clear. According to Shakespear, the Sporting Giants programme is less a recruitment tool, and more about what he calls "adding talent at the top end." He says: "Realistically, those lined up for the blue-riband rowing events in 2012 are

SPORTING GIANTS



pretty much already in the system, but there is a real chance we could find the one or two excellent athletes that we need to top up, and fill the missing places in an eight, for example."

So how many people does he realistically think he'll find? "I've already seen two or three today that could show real potential," he states. "I've seen boys pulling nearly 1000m on the ergos in three minutes, which is pretty amazing considering none of them have really used rowing machines before – something that we factor into our calculations."

Any initiative that swells the number of rowers entering the system has to be a good thing. The bad news, however, is that there could be many more excellent potential rowers unearthed – of a far better standard that normally turn up to rowing clubs – that once found, won't make the top 30, and could feel surplus to requirements. Is there a danger these people could disappear as soon as they have been found?

Shakespeare says he has already thought of this. "We knew that if we found lots of people, but then left them feeling inadequate, the process could well tarnish the image of rowing," he says seriously. "That's why we're making it clear to candidates that we'll be inviting their local clubs to take them on, nurture them, and develop their interest in rowing. The ARA has been contacting clubs about this and the message we're giving the kids is that even though they may not be selected, getting out there and rowing is the fastest way to get noticed. We're also saying club rowing is still an avenue where they can potentially become international oarsmen and women."

For high-jumper Ella Harvey, a 19-year-old student from Gloucester studying sports education, this is a comfort: "I've really enjoyed the selection process, and if I don't get in, I at least want to give rowing a go locally."

For the competitors finishing their tests, the next six weeks will be a nervous wait, although the ARA is posting the average scores from each city on its website so the athletes can benchmark themselves. For Shakespeare though, the number crunching will only just be beginning.

As for me, the realisation that I'm too old and too short was finally sealed. I'll stick to my club rowing, I think... 🏊‍♂️

ONLINE EXTRA!

Details of how clubs can register their interest in accepting tall and talented athletes, and average results from each of the testing sessions are available at www.ara-rowing.org/sportinggiants



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SPORTING GIANTS IN NUMBERS...

- 4500:** Number of applicants aged 16 to 25-years-old from the UK's Sporting Giants campaign.
- 2000:** Number of applicants short-listed for rowing testing.
- 1500:** Number actually tested.
- 60:** Those who make the first cut (30 men, 30 women) and will undertake a further set of trials at the National Water Sports Centre in Nottingham.
- 40:** Maximum number of athletes that will be selected for training with ARA coaches.

Who knows? Number of athletes that could assist the GB Rowing Team in winning Gold medals in 2012!