



All bar one

As the Great Sound of Bermuda calls and the America's Cup draws closer, decorated Olympian Sir Ben Ainslie talks boats, business and babies with **Tom Pountney**

A smouldering determination and unbounded ambition burns deep behind Sir Ben Ainslie's relaxed and amiable demeanour.

Four Olympic gold medals, one America's Cup title, 11 World Championships, a knighthood, a wedding and a baby; all before tuning 40. It reads like the achievements of an entire team, not just an individual in his pomp. It is that team environment that has driven the intense focus of Sir Ben away from Olympic sailing towards the America's Cup. Victory with Oracle Team USA tasted sweet in the 2013 edition, but something was missing.

A little over two months after Ainslie inspired the greatest comeback in America's Cup history, Land Rover BAR (Ben Ainslie Racing) opened for business. At the heart of the movement is one achievement that still eludes Team Principal and Skipper Sir Ben; 'bringing the America's Cup home'. In order to host the prestigious race, a nation first has to win it.

The contest for the oldest trophy in international sport began in 1851 on the UK's Isle of Wight, but it has never been held aloft by a British crew. That year, legend has it that Queen Victoria asked who had come second. "There is no second", HRH was informed.

This painful reminder does not sit comfortably with Sir Ben, who has won almost everything else in the sport with the Union Jack on his chest: "We are a new team and we have to play catch up with those who have been around for many cycles of the Cup," he explains. "Oracle Team USA, Sweden's Artemis Racing, Emirates Team New Zealand; we have to build infrastructure and hardware that not only enables us to compete with these teams, but creates an opportunity for us to beat them."

Ainslie knows what it takes to win. Oracle Team USA were

4-0 down in the 34th America's Cup Race when they asked him to replace John Kostecki as tactician. Sir Ben, who was skipper of the team's back-up boat, had never sailed in the role before, and was given just 24 hours to prepare. Despite Team New Zealand's lead stretching out to 8-1 (nine points would have won it), Ainslie inspired eight successive victories to become the first Briton for 110 years to be part of a Cup-winning team. Now he is building his own.

Sir Ben secured £25m investment in just eight weeks to start a movement that pervades the barriers of sailing and transcends sport. His primary focus may be the 2017 America's Cup in Bermuda, but beyond that, Land Rover BAR has the potential to be a catalyst in creating a more sustainable and environmentally-aware world, as well as providing a huge boost to the British economy and Britain's sporting status.

Ainslie points to the impact F1 team McLaren had on the automobile industry in the UK: "It has been a very instinctive campaign, largely as a result of the intense pace," he reflects.

Main: Training session ahead of America's Cup in Bermuda
Below: BAR on *HMS Victory*

"From the start, three years ago, to building an America's Cup team, the 1851 Trust, Land Rover BAR Academy and a very strong sustainability culture, we have had to make quick-fire decisions."

Ainslie's quick-thinking saw him win medals at every Olympic Games he competed in – from Atlanta '96 where he won silver, to gold in Sydney, Athens, Beijing and London. But raising £80m to compete against teams bankrolled by billionaires Larry Ellison (Oracle) and Torbjörn Törnqvist (Artemis) is another matter altogether.

"It has been a fascinating challenge off the water too," admits Ainslie. "I wanted to find quality people who could help build the team commercially."

Most importantly, Ainslie is passionate about his work at the forefront of modern-day engineering on and off the water: "It does help to have been there before. We have a lot of people involved from winning campaigns. We have the vision of America's Cup grandees, we have talent coming through the academy, and we have brought great experience in from other industries. We were careful to select team players – it is no good having talent if you have big egos and people that will not work together." ➤

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Among the throngs of people that turned out to see a second victory at Portsmouth in 2016, were the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. HRH The Duchess is Patron of the 1851 Trust, Land Rover BAR's official charity, which aims to harness the power of sport and draw on inspiration from the team to help young people engage with sport, technology, engineering and maths. "The Duchess came aboard our test boat and did an incredible job of steering at almost 40mph," Ainslie recalls. "There are not many people who do as good a job as that, we were all very impressed by her skills. HRH is a keen sailor and has a lot of offshore experience on Trans-Atlantic passages."

It was not Sir Ben's first brush with royalty. In 2013 he collected a knighthood from Princess Anne at Buckingham Palace following his fifth Olympic medal at London 2012, "I felt very special for my

family – particularly my parents, who have always been so supportive. It was wonderful for them to be able to share in that moment at the Palace."

2013 was also a year touched by tragedy. While trying to develop his own team, and simultaneously gain experience with Oracle Team USA, Ainslie's close friend, and fellow Team GB Olympian, Andrew 'Bart' Simpson MBE, passed away. Simpson's Artemis boat capsized while practising manoeuvres on the America's Cup course in San Francisco Bay.

Ainslie has always been well aware of the perils of sailing. He remembers the stories his father, Roderick, told him of the 1973 Whitbread Race around the world, where 'Roddy' captained *Second Life* home in 150 days. It is, perhaps, where Sir Ben's tenacity stems from, but difficulties with serious sun allergies, sponsorship, World Series disqualification and a number of setbacks helped to build a resilience and appetite for victory like few others. ➤



In March 2015, former McLaren F1 Team Principal and CEO, Martin Whitmarsh, joined Land Rover BAR to run the business while Ainslie switched his focus to racing.

Three months later, the team made a monumental statement on home waters by winning the first of nine Louis Vuitton America's Cup World Series races. More than 100,000 people lined the Southsea seafront each day as Ainslie's men became the first British crew to win a Series race. They went on to win another three in that series, securing qualification and two bonus points to carry forward to Bermuda and the America's Cup Qualifiers, with their first race against Artemis Racing on 26 May 2017. Land Rover BAR must win both the qualifier, and challenger play-offs, to meet 2010

and 2013 champions Oracle Team USA in the America's Cup Match presented by Louis Vuitton.

"Winning the Louis Vuitton America's Cup World Series represents a very small part of the job done," Ainslie points out.



Above: Ainslie with HRH The Duchess of Cambridge Left: Sir Ben, the ultimate team player Below: Turning 40 this year, Ainslie has to stay incredibly fit

Main: The prized America's Cup
Inset: Ainslie with one of BAR's boats at HQ in Portsmouth, UK



When Sir Keith Mills (creator of Air Miles) pulled the funding on British America's Cup team for 2013, Sir Ben switched his focus back to the Olympic Games and became the most decorated Olympic sailor of all time.

"Olympic sport is different," he explains. "I had a strong support team, but I was racing as an individual. America's Cup is the ultimate team sport, and victory with Oracle in 2013 was a real eye-opener for me. I found it far more rewarding to enjoy success with a great team than anything you can achieve as an individual sportsman."

As Team Principal and skipper, it seems Sir Ben still has naming rights however. The name given to all his boats, since his parents bought him a £100 dinghy, aged eight, is *Rita*, a title carried forward to the 2017 Land Rover BAR AC45 and ACC.

"That [Olympic] part of my career is over though," Ainslie reassures us. "I received a lot of requests to attend Rio 2016, but I didn't want to do that. I had a wonderful involvement with the Olympic Games over two decades, but it is time to focus on the America's Cup. There is no point dwelling on past achievements."

No doubt there will be a time when Sir Ben can sit back and appreciate those incredible Olympic highlights: the silver at Atlanta 1996 (aged 19) that drove him to go one better; the thrilling revenge over Brazilian sailor Robert Schneidt at Sydney 2000; dominating his Finn class rivals at Athens 2004 despite a disastrous first day; overcoming mumps to win in difficult conditions at Beijing

2008 and then London. From the honour of being the first London 2012 Olympic torchbearer on UK soil, to carrying Team GB's flag at the closing ceremony, it was a fitting finale for one of Britain's greatest Olympians of all time.

"I have been incredibly fortunate to capitalise on some great opportunities in my life and sporting career, and certainly carrying the flag was one that stands out. I hadn't been into the stadium before that moment, and the atmosphere was electric."

Ainslie is set to reach another milestone in February 2017 when he turns 40. Contrary to a Chinese media quip in 2008, he is human after all: "As we all grow older and experience more in life, we all have ups and downs. Like everybody else, I have had a few down moments, and that is inevitable. But getting through those hard times, enjoying marriage and becoming a father, have been the best things that ever happened to me. It feels as if the jigsaw has come together and everything is a lot clearer."

Lady Ainslie (TV sports presenter Georgie Thompson) and Sir Ben named their daughter, Bellatrix, which is Latin for Warriorress: "She does appear to have a bit of her father's determination in her eyes, so who knows what's going to happen!"

Sir Ben, Lady Ainslie and his 100-plus strong team at BAR Land Rover will be hoping it is the star of Bellatrix, and not that of Oracle or Artemis (named after

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a Greek goddess), that rises in Bermuda this June.

"After that, who knows," says Sir Ben. "For me the America's Cup and the Olympic Games are the big achievements, but the Jules Verne [non-stop around the world record] is something that I have an eye on. It would be the ultimate challenge."

Not forgetting an opportunity to defend the 2021 America's Cup on home soil if Land Rover BAR win of course. The fires burn on. ■

