



# A remarkable



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



■ As a TV producer Digby has worked on the America's Cup, documentaries, even cooking shows. A keen sailor, before broadcasting he was a yachting journalist and magazine editor.

Documenting Geoff Holt's ambition to become the first quadriplegic sailor to skipper a boat across the Atlantic involved rolling a lot of tape, asking a lot of questions and intruding into moments that most of us would prefer to remain private, like getting up, going to bed, or having a shower.

Geoff can't do these things by himself. Aged 18, a fateful dive into the surf on a Caribbean beach axed any plans he had as a yachtsman by breaking the sixth vertebra down his spine, below the neck. The result was quadriplegia: paralysis of all four limbs – both arms and both legs.

As I sit in my comfortable study, I try to imagine how it must feel for any youngster to lie in a hospital bed and come to terms with not being able to move again. It must be a dark place. Geoff writes about this in his excellent book, *Walking on Water*.

Fast forward 25 years and a wife, a son, a career later, Geoff is waving the Union Jack after an epic voyage of 3,000 nautical miles taking a gruelling four weeks. It was a tough time for Geoff, reliant on a motorised wheelchair, determined to sail the boat himself, and also on his personal care assistant, Susana Scott, 29, from New Zealand, who was recruited to help him in the necessities of life, but not the sailing.

TV execs have been asking me on my return, 'so, what's the story?' And I say, after a pause, that I think it's about a remarkable man who's turned such a negative into an amazing positive while inspiring many people along the way. Oh, and a girl who showed remarkable grit in helping him achieve his dream.

Onboard with Geoff, I was astonished at how many emails he received each day from people around the world, able and otherwise, saying how much he was touching their lives. One emailer even

Quadriplegic sailor Geoff Holt achieved a personal dream when he completed an Atlantic crossing aboard a specially designed 18m (60ft) catamaran. Film maker Digby Fox accompanied Geoff and his carer, and tells the remarkable story

2007 aboard a tiny 4.6m (15ft) Challenger trimaran, an impressive feat for Geoff and his entourage, including wife Elaine and son Tim. Then the subtle muse that we all know as sailors whispered in his ear: hmmm, wouldn't it be great to sail across the Atlantic...

**The journey**

We set off from the Canary Islands on 10 December 2009 – the quadriplegic, his carer and the cameraman. Our ETA was 17 days and the theory was that we would be whistled along on this beautiful cat by the swift and steady Trade Winds, but in reality the wind beat us on the nose, the engines clogged up with filthy fuel, our wind indicator wouldn't work and we took a month, spending Christmas and New Year at sea.

Geoff was determined to do the sailing himself, and he specifically recruited Susana for her complete lack of sailing experience. Ah Geoff. What a genius plan. Susana's role, which is normally carried out by Geoff's wife Elaine, was to lift Geoff in and out of his chair, wash, cook, look after his personal needs, and so on.

This was a challenging job for anyone, but in all my oceans I've never come across

**Geoff was determined to do the sailing himself – he specifically recruited Susana for her total lack of sailing experience**

a crewmate who suffered so long from sea sickness. The fact that Susana had to become chief engineer, upside-down in both port and starboard engines, sucking fuel through pipes and bleeding the bleeding engines for the first week may not have helped.

I asked Susana how she was coping after several days at sea and she said: 'I'm finding it really hard. The movement adds a whole dimension and we can't seem to do anything to make it more stable. I'm really struggling. Geoff's doing his best to not get me to do as many lifts as possible but it's hard, really hard.'

Susana was talking about the technique of lifting a quadriplegic from wheelchair to bed and back. It's a full body hug, then a heave backwards and upwards, pivoting on your feet to swing your man to the side. There's quite a technique to it and I winced thinking how easy it would be to damage your back in the process. The problem at sea of course is doing all this on a rolling, pitching platform. Geoff eventually bore right away and made the motion as steady as possible, but it was still hard for Susana.

Halfway across the Atlantic, after we'd made a detour to the Cape Verde Islands for a superb mechanic, Caesar, to completely drain, clean, bleed and generally expunge all dirty fuel, I asked Susana how she thought it was going: 'I'm a mixed bag of emotions,' she said. 'I can't

# voyage



Photos Digby Fox

wrote that after losing his job, with family troubles and health worries, he was in the process of committing suicide by hanging, looking for the right knot online, when he came across Geoff's website. What Geoff was doing stopped him in his tracks. His email left us speechless.

Perhaps this is the point. On a plane once, having seen all the movies, I listened to one of those self-help muppets – 'Make your weaknesses your strengths' – and all that stuff. I guess it all boils down to positive thinking, and in my experience Geoff lives and breathes a can-do approach to life.

When Geoff was deciding where to sail to in the Caribbean, one place loomed large in his thoughts, the actual beach that he dived in to with such drastic consequences: Cane Garden Bay, Tortola, in the British Virgin Islands.

Geoff communicates with warmth and passion about his condition and his life,

and his reason for attempting the voyage.

'Of course my emotions are going to be all over the place going back to the beach where I had my accident 25 years ago. A lot of people are presuming I'll be looking for closure, but I'm not. To look for closure would infer that I'm lamenting what happened during the following 25 years. But I'm not. Because had I not had the accident I wouldn't have met my wife Elaine, or had our wonderful son Timothy. This is about going back and celebrating the fact that yes, I can do these things despite my disability.'

In his teens Geoff (now 43) made three Atlantic crossings, crewing boat deliveries back and forth. He spent a chunk of his childhood in Hamble and saltwater was beginning to pump around his system. His accident put paid to that career, so he worked for Deloitte and later in antiques to make ends meet. Eventually, the salt in his blood had him sailing around Britain in





**Geoff is totally reliant on his motorised wheelchair to move about on land and at sea**



**‘What an emotional return to Cane Garden Bay. It feels like a celebration of life. What a great finish to a great project.’ Geoff Holt**

wait to see land. It’s been horrible sometimes, I just want it to be over. It’s been such a test and I doubt how I’ve lived up to those tests.’

Looking back at how this complete non-sailor took on the task of looking after Geoff across the Atlantic, plus how she dealt with endless diesel issues (the generator packed in towards the end, which meant another two days upside down in a dark hole), I can’t help but take my hat off to her. New Zealand should award her their highest honour, because she toughed it out on the rolling seas and didn’t fail Geoff or herself.

I should mention that yes, like most passage-making trips, we motor-sailed on windless days. But the crucial issue with needing diesel was charging batteries.

Geoff was particularly reliant on the self-steering rams and sheeting hydraulics (see About the Boat, opposite) to be able to sail *Impossible Dream*.

### **Facing up to issues**

Mentally, Geoff faced his own issues. He could not get down to the engines, so for the days Susana and I spent tinkering, fixing, bleeding and swearing, he couldn’t help. It was unspoken, but I sensed he would have been the first to pile into these problems if he could.

The many physical issues facing a quadriplegic skipper sailing an 18m (60ft) boat included getting about, staying upright, getting ropes around winches, even pushing buttons, and of course journeying so far away from any help. On

the windier and rougher days, Geoff had a job to simply stay in his chair. A large catamaran can bounce around in chop and swell as it hurtles over waves, but *Impossible Dream*, made from carbon and being totally rigid, had an unforgiving see-saw motion. I raced a wood-built 12m (40ft) trimaran offshore for two years, and that was as smooth as a Rolls-Royce by comparison.

Geoff has limited movement in his arms (30% bicep, no tricep, wrist or fingers). Some days I could see the sheer force of the brutal seaway causing him real trouble (me too, come to think of it).

### **Broadcasting onboard**

We did a great deal of broadcasting from onboard, so I ended up being busy. I’ve never seen a live TV broadcast to terrestrial news from a boat before, but we did several, and for me this involved a jungle of wires and a complex set-up.

The BBC fitted out our boat with the best Thrane & Thrane satellite communications available to feed live pictures back to London, and BBC technical boss Mark Tyrrell, who makes sure news come in from every corner of the globe, used our project as a test case for a new system.

It worked brilliantly for all the Lives, video uploads and ISDN radio interviews, which was just as well, because over the Christmas period Geoff’s story gained significant traction.

### **The finish line**

Eventually, after the diversions, delays, overall lack of wind and a month of slog, we made the destination of Cane Garden Bay in Tortola. This was Geoff’s moment. He was a bag of adrenaline, emotion, relief and delight at seeing his family. Boats



**Despite Christmas being spent mid-Atlantic, and many miles from family, it was still a cheerful time**

## ABOUT THE BOAT

# Impossible Dream

A great name for such an innovative prototype, *Impossible Dream* is an 18m (60ft) carbon catamaran designed by Nic Bailey for Mike Browne. Mike founded the retail chain Snow & Rock, became paralysed in a skiing accident and commissioned Nic, the architect who designed those distinctive pods on the London Eye, to come up with something he could sail with family and friends.

Built in 2003 by Multimarine in Plymouth, the boat is striking in many ways. The interior cabin and deck are all on one level, with a gentle slope around the outside up towards the foredeck. This makes getting around in a wheelchair easy.

## Controls

There is a steering position outside on both hulls, but the whole ship can be operated from inside, with hydraulic winches and lines coming right into the 'command module', which looks like a set from a Star Trek film.

'As a boy,' says Nic Bailey, 'I used to love Dan Dare comics. We built a full-sized mock-up of the saloon in our studio and I spent a lot of time in a wheelchair to get a feel for how everything should work.'

The height of the galley worktops is an example. They're low and awkward to



Architect Nic Bailey also designed the London Eye pods

use when standing, but pull up a chair and everything makes sense, with fridge, cooker, sink and utensils to hand.

Nic says his main design challenge was sail handling. 'Sailing from a chair means no leaping up to the base of the mast to bounce halyards, so every line is powered by hydraulic winches. Sheets presented a particular problem. How can you ease a sheet from three steering positions (one inside and two outside)? Commercially available captive reel winches were too heavy and expensive, so we devised a hydraulic ram system connected to the sheets through blocks which could all be operated by simply pressing buttons. We also used hydraulic rams to

control the mainsheet and the coachroof-mounted traveller.'

Other clever touches include a fold-out lift platform to raise or lower a wheelchair user to the dock and back. This works from a remote control and in operation is another sci-fi touch.

## Panoramic view

You can see Nic's London Eye influence in the cockpit windows and the amazing view from inside to almost 360° outside, a key element when sailing from a chair at the command position.

Overall, *Impossible Dream* is a clever and complex boat, and without her and Mike and Martine Browne's generosity in lending her to Geoff, this trip would never have happened.



tooted and crowds cheered as Geoff circled just off the beach – that most significant landmark in his life.

'Incredible,' said Geoff. 'Twenty-five years in the making, a year in the planning, and what a marvellous reception. What an emotional return to Cane Garden Bay. It feels like a celebration of life. What a great finish to a great project.'

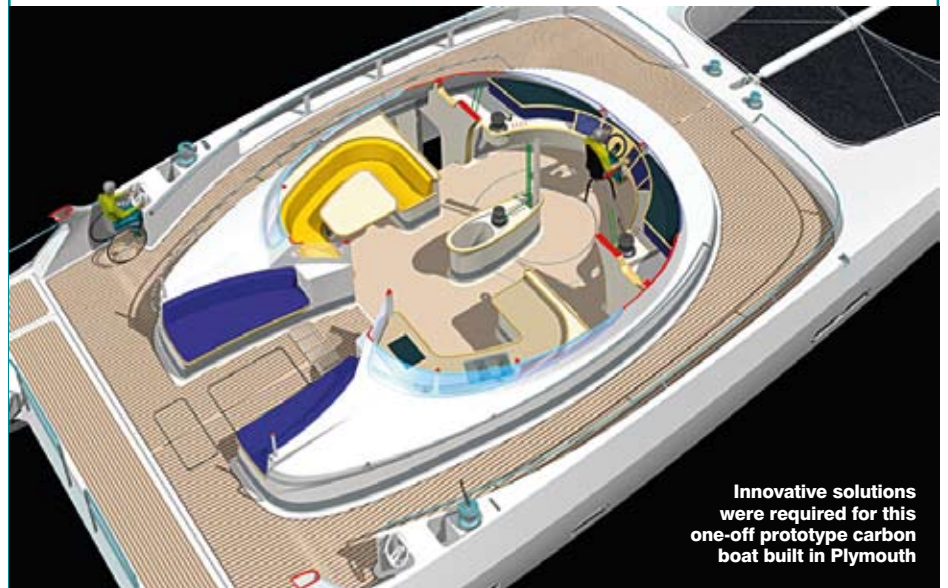
The Governor of the British Virgin Islands welcomed Geoff on land with a heartfelt speech, and the government there has made Geoff and family honorary citizens. It was an emotional and happy ending to this voyage.

Sitting on the sand of Cane Garden Bay a couple of days later I asked Geoff what he thought the moral of the story was.

'Princess Anne summed it up for me when she said that disability need not be a barrier to achieving your dream. In fact anyone – regardless of their ability, if they really set their heart on it – can achieve what they set out to do.

'There'll be hardships along the way, sometimes painful ones, but there's no feeling like completing a journey against all the odds. It's the best feeling in the world.' But I'd like to leave the final word to Tony Tromans, consultant surgeon at the Duke of Cornwall Spinal Treatment Centre in Salisbury, one of 11 such rehabilitation centres around the UK that do incredible work. Tony was Geoff's doctor 25 years ago.

'The fact that Geoff, who can only get about in an electric wheelchair using a joystick, sails around Britain and across the Atlantic is a very useful story for us to say to patients that life hasn't stopped. There is always light at the end of the tunnel. Disability will shut some doors, but it will open others...'



Innovative solutions were required for this one-off prototype carbon boat built in Plymouth