



# ROW HARD NO EXCUSES

*"Like all good sports docs, the film goes from micro to macro on a dime, ultimately achieving an exhausted beauty."*

Ty Burr, Boston Globe

*"Compelling... more deeply revealing than the triumph-over-adversity saga one expects."*

Dennis Harvey, Variety

*"The ordeal is captured in all its gory glory... a terrific personal epic of endurance and wit."*

Roger Moore, Orlando Sentinel

*"Raw with emotions... nothing less than fascinating."*

Adia Walburger, Park City Record

**DIRECTOR/PRODUCER:**  
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*Request to reviewers and writers:  
If possible, please do not reveal whether or not Tom and John make it across the Atlantic.  
Thank you.*

### **Logline:**

Two middle-aged men set out to win “the world’s toughest race”—three thousand miles across the Atlantic Ocean in a rowboat. Is it a noble quest or an ill-fated nightmare?

### **Synopsis:**

*Row Hard No Excuses* is an award-winning documentary that chronicles the voyage of the only American entry in a rowing race across the Atlantic Ocean. It is both an exciting sports-adventure story and an intimate portrait of the two-man crew that explores masculinity, midlife and ambition.

At 51 and 41, John Zeigler and Tom Mailhot are among the oldest competitors to participate in the Atlantic Rowing Challenge, a three thousand mile race from the Canary Islands to Barbados. They spend three years and personal savings to make their dream of winning possible, but the ocean is easy to underestimate, and their quest offers one major obstacle after another. Drawing from their compelling video diary at sea, the film engages the audience in the emotional challenges and rewards of their arduous journey. The unique perspective of Tori Murden, the first woman to row solo across an ocean, and the diverse chorus of other teams—men and women, young and old—add context to a meditation on human endurance and perseverance in the most extreme conditions.

Directed by first time feature director Luke Wolbach, *Row Hard No Excuses* is a labor-of-love collaboration with his father Bill Wolbach. “*Row Hard No Excuses*” is the slogan John and Tom wore on their t-shirts before the start of the race.

### **Technical Information:**

1x88 minutes & 1x57 minutes (CC, DVI)

English

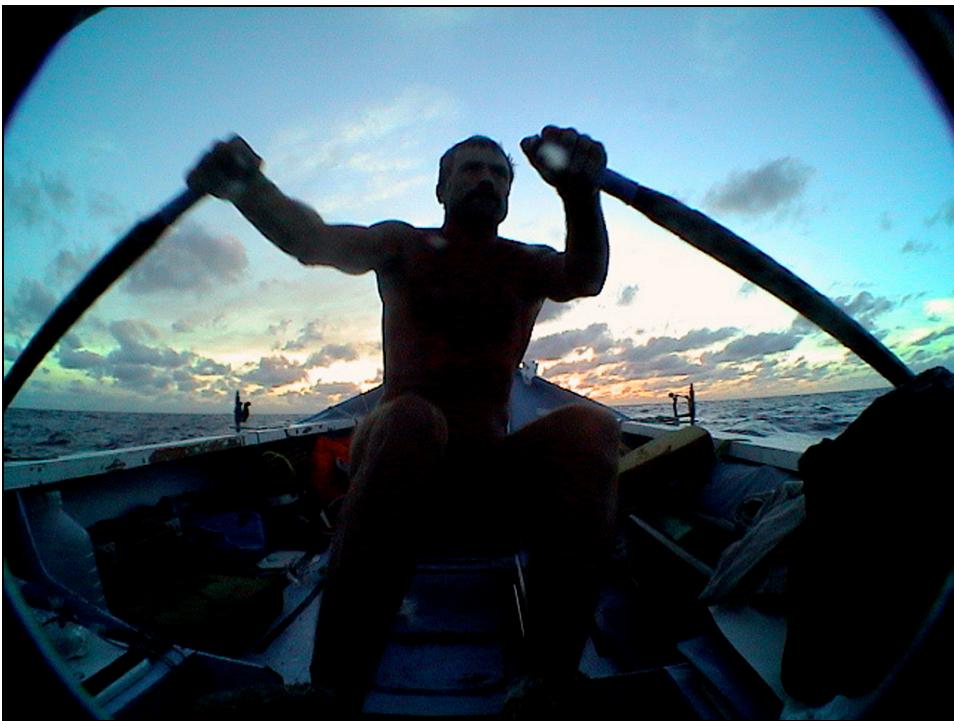
Color, miniDV, DVCAM, BetaSP

Aspect Ratio: 4:3 full frame

Stereo Audio

### **Broadcasts:**

United States (currently on PBS), Canada, New Zealand, Israel, Greece



### **Background:**

Ocean rowing, as a sport, has only been around since the inaugural Atlantic Challenge race in 1997. Before then crossings were strictly Guinness Book of World Record affairs. In fact, fewer people have rowed across the Atlantic than have climbed Mount Everest. Race rules pit two-person teams against each other rowing unassisted with no food drops or navigational aid. The challenge is an enormous undertaking even before the start. Each team has to gain their own sponsorship, see to the building and outfitting of their boat (which arrives as a plywood kit) and leave their jobs and families for a couple of grueling months at sea. Rowers have to contend with sleep deprivation, seasickness, isolation, boredom and cramped living conditions. Most of the competitors row naked to avoid painful chafing. Even with a steep entry fee and no prize money, Tom and John's race drew thirty-six teams from fifteen nations including New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, China, and eight European countries.

## **Bios:**

### **John Zeigler** (Rower)

John was just a teenager when he first dreamed of rowing the Atlantic. Born and raised in New Jersey, he is the father of two girls. Every morning at 4:00 am, he and his brother, Danny, open the doors to their food wholesaling business, which he started with his father in the mid-1980s. A self-described fitness fanatic, John is a marathon canoe racer with rugged good looks and the upper body of a football player. His decision to pursue the race was the last straw that ended his marriage.

### **Tom Mailhot** (Rower)

Tom, a New England native, is an ex-minor league hockey player whose career was stopped short by an eye injury. He has since become an accomplished kayak adventurer. His tall physique, unkempt blond hair and bushy moustache give him the look of a modern day pirate. He has an intense gaze that masks a mischievous sense of humor. Tom was laid off from his job as a construction supervisor for putting too much energy into building the boat and ended up deeply in debt as a result of the race.

### **Tori Murden** (Tom and John's coach)

Tori is the first woman to row solo across the Atlantic and Tom and John's unofficial advisor. Her successful crossing came after two failed attempts, one that was cut short by hurricane Danielle, which nearly killed her. She has written a thesis on the theology of adventure and her spiritual outlook introduces a different perspective on the race.

### **Luke Wolbach** (Producer, Director, Camera, Editor)

Luke is an award-winning filmmaker and editor residing in San Francisco. His first film, *Seeds of Tibet: Voices of Children in Exile*, which he co-produced and co-directed, was a half hour documentary about the lives of young Tibetan refugees at a school in Northern India. It was broadcast by PBS affiliates throughout the country and was awarded an Earthwatch Award, a Cine Eagle Award and a documentary award at the Philadelphia International Film Festival. He has worked independently as an editor on projects that have broadcast on PBS, Bravo, and the National Geographic and Sundance channels. *Row Hard No Excuses* is his first collaboration with his father, Bill Wolbach.

### **Bill Wolbach** (Executive Producer, Producer, Camera)

*Row Hard No Excuses* is Bill's first film. In the past he has worked as tech support and as a consultant for financial institutions. More recently he turned his hobby and passion for motorcycles into a job as a BMW motorcycle technician. Active in his community, he has served on the board of directors at Boston's South End Community Health Center for over twenty years. During his college years he rowed crew for Harvard and now gets his exercise in an ocean going single scull. It was through competitive paddling that he met Tom Mailhot and learned of the Atlantic Rowing Challenge. Though immediately drawn to the event, he decided to make this documentary rather than enter.

## **Film Festivals and Awards:**

### **2007**

Slamdance Film Festival  
True/False Film Festival  
Bermuda International Film Festival  
Florida Film Festival  
Chicago International Documentary Festival  
Independent Film Festival of Boston  
Tenerife International Film Festival (BEST DIRECTOR)  
MountainFilm in Telluride (MUST SEE AWARD)  
Jackson Hole Film Festival (BEST SPORTS ACTION FILM)  
Waterfront Fim Festival  
Provincetown International Film Festival  
Nantucket Film Festival (BEST STORYTELLING IN A DOCUMENTARY)  
Calgary International Film Festival  
Sidewalk Moving Picture Festival  
Port Townsend Film Festival  
Edmonton International Film Festival  
Camden International Film Festival  
New Zealand International Documentary Festival  
New Hampshire Film Festival (BEST DOCUMENTARY)  
Taos Mountain Film Festival  
Temecula Valley International Film Festival  
BendFilm  
Detroit Docs  
Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival  
Santa Fe Film Festival  
Anchorage International Film Festival

### **2008**

Wild and Scenic Environmental Film Festival  
Spokane International Film Festival  
San Francisco IndieFest  
Boulder International Film Festival  
Big Sky Documentary Film Festival  
Sedona International Film Festival  
Flagstaff Mountain Film Festival (BEST SPORTS ACTION FILM)  
Pacific Palisades Film Festival  
Los Angeles United Film Festival  
Tiburon International Film Festival (BEST SPORTS FILM)  
East Lansing Film Festival  
Ashland Independent Film Festival  
Sonoma Valley Film Festival  
Maryland Film Festival  
Santa Cruz Film Festival  
Newport Beach Film Festival  
Mendocino Film Festival

## Festival Reviews:

*"This film is a triumph... it is a testimony to the vast loneliness of the ocean and the mental fortitude it takes to cross it."*

Bob Whitby, Orlando Weekly

*"An engrossing, tautly edited documentary."*

Joshua Katzman, Chicago Reader

*"A meditation on the outer limits of human endurance, the commitments we make to our friends and to ourselves, and what it means to be a winner... It is also imbued with a good deal of humor and beauty... a remarkable film."*

Michael Read, Release Print (San Francisco)

*"A great benchmark for the genre... it's impossible not to be swept away... This is the one you shouldn't miss if it comes on TV or DVD. See now. No Excuses."*

Gina Carbone, Portsmouth Herald (New Hampshire)

*"The film is a mix of all the classic narratives: man versus himself, man versus God, and man versus another man (in this case, his teammate). Friendships are destroyed, marriages are tested, and innumerable blisters are popped throughout the voyage, which is as psychologically challenging as it is physically brutal."*

Christian Schaeffer, The Pitch (Kansas City)

*"Similar in some ways to Touching the Void (2003), Row Hard is especially effective in illustrating how extreme physical conditions can lay bare a person's true self."*

Cheryl Eddy, San Francisco Bay Guardian

*"The film's measured pace works... Row Hard delivers more than a chronicle of a tortuous competition—it explores the protagonists' near-fanatical quest for 'success', and the hunger of a son for his father's recognition."*

Laura Lewis-Barr, Screen Magazine (Chicago)

*"Provides thought-provoking moments carried and remembered by the viewer long after the final frame has ended."*

Scott Neil, Royal Gazette (Bermuda)

*"It gets at the heart of what it means to be human and why sports, or journeys, are an essential part of human existence."*

Sam Petri, Planet Jackson Hole

*"Row Hard is, simply put, fascinating... Keep an eye out for this one... because it really deserves an audience."*

John Serba, Grand Rapid Press

*"Unlike Ernest Hemingway's 'Old Man and the Sea' or Yann Martel's 'The Life of Pi,' this event really happened. But truth always has been stranger than fiction."*

Martha's Vineyard Times

## **True/False Filmmaker Spotlight: Luke Wolbach, Director**

One might call "Row Hard No Excuses" Luke Wolbach's third child. The production, which began in earnest back in the summer of 2000, has so thoroughly overlapped with the timeline of Wolbach's young family that the two have become almost inextricably linked.

"I was married toward the end of 2003, the year we were fundraising," says Wolbach as he delineates his family history. "Then there was the editing after my son was born in 2004. My daughter was born last March. We thought we'd be done [with the film] by then, but that didn't turn out to be the case."

Many a night, Wolbach would put his kids to bed and then immediately head up to the attic of his San Francisco home for hours of solitary editing on the film, trying to compress 250 hours of raw footage into a concise package. It was his first feature-length project after years of documentary shorts and freelance editing work. Admittedly, Wolbach had gotten "really ambitious" and perhaps in over his head in attempting to complete the documentary. But with each misstep, he refined his methods.

"The past several years have been my film school experience," says Wolbach, poking fun at his relative lack of formal training.

Throughout 2001, Wolbach worked in concert with his father and brother to document the journey of two middle-aged rowers as they attempted to traverse 3,000 miles of unforgiving ocean from the Canary Islands to Barbados as part of the Atlantic Rowing Challenge. Unable to find sponsorship for their endeavor, the pair – Tom Mailhot and John Zeigler – constructed their own boat. They dug deep into their personal savings to finance their entry into the competition – despite the fact that no prize money lay waiting on the other end of the Atlantic.

"There's a heroic element to it," says Wolbach of the sport, "the idea that it will make you special. They want to do it first, do it fastest. They get it in their blood. Society at large doesn't necessarily feel like – unless it's for charity, it's a very individualistic pursuit. Some call it selfish."

For their single-minded devotion to the competition, both rowers' personal lives suffered greatly. Mailhot lost his job as a construction supervisor and Zeigler's marriage collapsed as a result of the demands that the race placed on them. As Wolbach found himself drawn deeper into the heart of this project – the months of scrounging up funds, the marathon editing sessions, the debates on how to best tell the rowers' story – he began to empathize all the more with the plight of his subjects.

"'Obsession' is close," he says. "There are a lot of similarities and parallel experiences between making a film and rowing across an ocean. I definitely felt obsessed. But it was a worthwhile endeavor."

Worthwhile, because not only did Wolbach complete his first filmmaking odyssey, but he also emerged from the experience with a new perspective on his father and co-producer, Bill. The whole project actually stemmed from Bill's experience as a rower. He had met Tom Mailhot through their shared interest in canoe racing. When he heard that his old acquaintance was preparing to tackle the

grueling Atlantic Challenge, he brought his filmmaking son aboard, hoping to put together a short promotional video to help Mailhot and Zeigler find a sponsor. From those small and simple beginnings, Bill's passion helped to fuel the project as it expanded into a full-length beast.

"I learned a lot about my father, especially," Luke says. "He feels what these guys feel. They had strained relationships with their fathers, and I think he had a strained relationship with his own father. And then there's the whole aspect of being middle-aged and having feelings of regret. It was an eye-opener, to hear him talk about these things himself."

The completed film also helped to salve the relationship of its two stars. After those months trapped together in the cramped confines of their boat, enduring extreme mental and physical fatigue, Mailhot and Zeigler did not speak to each other for a good two years after the race. But both attended the film's world premier at last month's Slamdance Film Festival, and fielded audience questions afterward.

"It felt like a closure event of sorts," says Wolbach, part of the rowers' "reconciliation process."

Wolbach, however, isn't quite ready to put the experience behind him. He's still promoting *Row Hard*, hoping to get a one-hour version broadcast on television and release a DVD. Any talk of future projects might be a bit premature, but Wolbach would prefer to do something centered in San Francisco, so that his next film won't distract him too much from raising his family. For Luke Wolbach, three children are enough for now.

By Jeremy Goldmeier , February 2007

**Credits:**

Directed by Luke Wolbach  
Produced by Bill Wolbach & Luke Wolbach  
Edited by Traci Loth & Luke Wolbach  
Original Music by B. Quincy Griffin  
Graphic Animation by Erik Dillinger  
Executive Producer Bill Wolbach  
With generous support from Lenny Lieberman

## FEATURING (American)

Tom Mailhot & John Zeigler  
Tori Murden McClure  
Danny Zeigler  
Dianne Zeigler  
Sarah Evertson  
Lee Mailhot  
Sarah Kessans  
Emily Kohl

## FEATURING (Other Teams)

Jonathon Gornall  
Dominic Biggs  
Debra Veal  
Andrew Veal  
Rune Larsson  
Niclas Mardfelt  
Pedro Ripol  
Francisco Korff  
Steph Brown  
Jude Ellis  
Gary Fooks  
Dominic Marsh  
Pascal Hanssen  
Serge van Cleve  
Damian West  
Alex Hinton  
Sun Haibin  
Christian Havrehed  
Jo Lumsdon  
Tim Humfrey

## CAMERA

Tom Mailhot  
John Zeigler  
Luke Wolbach

**CO-PRODUCER**

Traci Loth

**PRODUCTION ADVISORS**

Toby Beach

Ethan Berry

Robert Hawk

Chris Rowe

Gail Silva

Peter Yost

**CONSULTING EDITORS**

Eric Neudel

Kim Roberts

**GRANT WRITER**

Ben Wolbach

**TORI MURDEN INTERVIEWER**

Addie Wolbach

**ADDITIONAL CAMERA**

Sarah Evertson

Al Viator

Bill Wolbach

**POST PRODUCTION SOUND SERVICES**

Robert Berke Sound, San Francisco

**SUPERVISING SOUND EDITOR**

Mark Escott

**SOUND EDITORS**

Robert Berke

Stephen Berke

**ONLINE FACILITY**  
Philo Television, San Francisco

**ONLINE EDITORS**  
Mike Dennis  
Shirley Gutierrez

**FISCAL SPONSOR**  
Film Arts Foundation, San Francisco

**FUNDED IN PART BY**  
Pacific Pioneer Fund

**MUSICIANS**  
Paul Baker – vocals & guitar  
Bryan Bowman – drums & percussion  
Yair Evnine – guitar & cello  
Lorenzo Farrel – bass

**MUSIC SUPERVISION & CLEARANCE**  
David Wurzburg and Brooke Wentz at The Rights Workshop

"No Controles"  
Written by Ignacio Cano  
Performed by Cafe Tacuba  
Courtesy of Universal Music Group

"Unreal"  
Written by Jules Blattner and Josh Davis  
Performed by UNKLE and DJ Shadow  
Courtesy of Universal Music Group

"Only Burn"  
Written by S. Buttrich, P. Bendtsen, H. Radeker  
Performed by 18th Dye  
Courtesy of 18th Dye

"Psychosis 1"  
Written by Joel Cadbury, Richard File, James Lavelle, James McDonald, and Brett Shaw  
Performed by UNKLE with South, Courtesy of Music Beyond

