DEDICATED DRAGONS

From novices to GB team ... boaters sacrifice time, money (and booze) in rise to the top

by **BOB WESTERDALE**

IF you'd have told Craig Haslingden and Damian Napper two years ago that they would be representing Great Britain in a European championship, they'd have thought you were having a laugh.

If you'd have told them they would have to fork out £5,000 — and observe a complete ban on alcohol — they'd have thought you were certifiable.

Yet this week both men, in their mid-40s, will be British Lions — or Dragons, as it turns out.

The pair will be paddling away in the European Dragon Boat Federation National Championships in Banyoles, Catalonia, Spain (August 31-September 4).

Both men were new to the sport — one of the world's fastest-growing participation events — until discovering it at Manvers Lake.

They embraced the hard work, discipline, team-work and technique so well that they were snapped up by the GB set up.

After months of gruelling training, they are now ready to take on the continent's best — with former Wales High School teacher Craig being picked to captain the squad.

"I have been doing this for around 19 months. During Covid times I took my sons Charlie and Jacob swimming there when regular facilities were shut and somebody asked me if I fancied a go at Dragon boating," said Craig (47), a former Dinnington rugby player.

"I come from a sporting background — swimming, rowing, triathlon, (he's also PE senior lecturer at Hallam University) — but I certainly never anticipated I'd be representing my country, it certainly wasn't on my radar.

"It does feel surreal. I was delighted and surprised to be asked to be captain, too.

"But it has not been easy, it has been the hardest training — physical and technical — I've ever done.

"Plus, the financial side has been challenging. Me and Damian have had to self-fund for all the training we've done, the weekends away, plus the transport and everything else to get us to Barcelona. We are looking at £2,500 each.

"There is no financial support from the governing body, it's been a bit of a struggle but I'm fortunate to have got some sponsorship."

Craig is a real ale lover but the GB coach implemented a booze ban on all his team, six months ahead of the Spanish contest.

"We are still on that ban until after the competition but on the final day and closing ceremony we'll be having a party!"

It has been a draining regime for Damian (46), a former Wickersley High school pupil, originally from Sunnyside.

"It's all quite serious now, nutritionally we are eating right and I also haven't had a drink since March!" he said.

"I like my wine so it has been a big change for me."

Father of two Damian, area operations manager for a crane hire company, never dreamed he would one day be a GB athlete.

"I have done a lot of sport in my time but never towards that level.

"Dragon races can be brutal; they are such hard graft — there can be collisions, mayhem, and it is physically exhausting," he said.

"Yet it is more about technique than brute force.

"The Manvers team has been turning heads recently. It is all very new to many of us but we are smashing it, beating established teams, and people are saying: 'Where did they come from, how are they so good?'

"I think the answer is that we are all very keen to do well. Manvers is a diverse club with swimming, triathlon, cyclists, and runners all coming together to train and build a team."

Craig is optimistic the ten GB paddlers can triumph in Spain.

"I'd say we are in with a shout of winning," he said. "We wouldn't have been allowed to enter if we hadn't been competitive.

"It is a tough one to predict because there are a lot of unknowns about the strengths of the opposition."

Craig said Manvers coach Trevor Coldron had been a massive influence.

"He got me into this sport, he has been exceptionally supportive of me and Damian."

DAMIAN NAPPER (second from left) with GB team-mates. Below: Manvers team.

COACH Trevor Coldron.

CRAIG HASLINGDEN ... GB paddler