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Dutchman, 23, Rowing Across Atlantic for Orphans

By Justin Varilek

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Tom Sauer attending a fundraising event in the Metropolis mall last month.

There are few things more challenging than scaling Mt. Everest or flying into space. A 23-year-old Dutchman who has lived most of his life in Russia is going to tackle one of them: rowing a small boat 4,720 kilometers across the Atlantic Ocean.

The Atlantic Rowing Race —⊠which will consist of about 60 days and 60 nights on the sea, nine-meter-high waves and the risk of shark attacks and commercial shipping accidents —⊠may not sound like the ideal Christmas vacation.

But Tom Sauer and his best friend, Tom Fancett, will cast off Monday for the voyage from the Canary Islands off West Africa to Barbados island in the Caribbean Sea to bring football fields to Russian orphanages.

“I feel like help is needed in this country, and the government doesn’t really acknowledge

that," said Sauer, son of the Dutch publisher Derk Sauer, founder of The Moscow Times. "The picture being portrayed is quite far from reality, and that is why it is just natural for me to help out.

"I'm not doing this only for charity, it is also an amazing opportunity for myself," he said in an interview. "But at the same time, if in doing so I can help out, it would be a sin for me not to. And for me Russia is my home."

Sauer hopes his two-man Team Tom will raise $202,000 to build football fields for several large orphanages within 300 kilometers of Moscow.

Sauer, who worked for two summers at an orphanage 400 kilometers south of Arkhangelsk, was shocked at the poor quality of its sports facilities and decided to team up with the Johan Cruyff Foundation, which builds football fields around the world, with his rowing trip. The funds will go to the Cruyff foundation's first projects in Russia.

Team Tom is also partnering with the Naked Heart Foundation, started by supermodel Natalya Vodianova, to build those fields for the orphanages outside Moscow. "They are going to help facilitate the building of the field because you need to know the system," Sauer explained. "Otherwise one-third of the money disappears, and I don't want to row 3,000 miles and then have some bureaucrat shift the money into his pocket."

Having lived for all but one year of his life in Russia, Sauer embraces his Russian roots and is known as "Tomsky" to his friends. He also loves sports and worked as an interpreter for Ruud Gullit during the Dutch football legend's five-month stint this year as head coach for FC Terek Grozny. "I grew up in Russia and have done sports my whole life, so I understand how important it is for a kid to participate in athletics as they are growing up," he said. "Also after having traveled a lot for Ruud Gullit, I saw how poor the facilities are throughout the country."

When Gullit was fired in June, Sauer found himself with seven months left before his final year of classes started at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. So he and his friend decided to do something useful — undergo an intensive five-month training regime to participate in an Atlantic challenge accomplished by the likes of Russian adventurist Fyodor Konyukhov. Fewer people have conquered an ocean this way than have climbed Everest or been into space, Sauer said in an e-mail sent to potential sponsors.

Sauer turned for help to rowing coach Anna Lupanova, who gives 11- to 16-year-old athletes free lessons on the Olimpiisky Grebnoi Canal, and started training in a boat called Krasny Oktyabr.

"When he first called me and told me he was planning on rowing for 60 days straight, I didn't think he had a chance," Lupanova said. "But when I met him, I could sense his desire. ... All of my other students are his fans now and they ask me everyday for updates on his progress."

Sauer attained sponsorship from PlayStation Russia for the $26,000 rowing boat and lined up Men's Health magazine, which is part of Sanoma Independent Media, the parent company of The Moscow Times, to be the main media partner. "Tom Sauer and Tom Fancett are very goal-oriented people," said PlayStation Russia general manager Sergei Klisho. "Not only are

they trying to overcome the potential difficulties that meet them along their paths, but they are also pushing their limits to attain their goals. Not everyone would risk crossing the ocean in a row boat."

Team Tom is competing against nine other pairs in the Atlantic Rowing Race, which pitches itself as the world's toughest rowing race. The competition, which also includes solos and teams of four, aims to raise money for various charities.

As of last month, Team Tom had raised between $40,000 and $47,000, said Sauer, and they had already established buyers for the boat. After the trip, they also plan to travel throughout the country to share their adventure and raise funds to bring football to some of the 140,000 children living in Russian orphanages.

"Russians have been very excited about this project," Sauer said. "It is kind of wild for them and they can't fully comprehend it, and they like me as a Russky-Gollandets to do something like this."

For more information on Team Tom, their voyage across the Atlantic or how to donate, visit teamtomatlanticrow.com or blago.ru.

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