

SAILING FIT

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Exclusive Interview with Tania Elias Calles Guinness World Record Holder for longest distance sailed unassisted in a dinghy.

I've had the pleasure of knowing Tania for many years. Always a friendly face in the boat park and positive personality to be around. Tania is most widely known as the Mexican Olympic Laser Radial sailor and has been ranked number one in the world. While I have always known that she is a phenomenal sailor it was just recently that I had the ability to really get to know more of her true personality and she has truly become one of the athletes I admire most.

On her most recent endeavor she set out to break the Guinness World record for longest distance sailed unassisted in a dinghy. I followed her journey and was so excited to see her break the record. She sailed 300 nautical miles unassisted in her Laser. As I read her blog I realized that I know that most people have no idea what type of mental and physical preparation it takes to do this. Tania was gracious enough to do an interview with me so I could share with you her journey and all of the hard work it took to pull this achievement off.

1-What made you decide to try to break a Guinness Book of World Record and what is the official title/record?

Since long ago I've watched the long distance races of some big boats, saw pictures on magazines, Internet, etc and every time I saw the huge waves they get to surf and ride and how they are surrounded 360 deg by only a moving water horizon, every time it caught my curiosity about how fun would it be to surf those huge waves on a laser and do a long distance sail with those conditions. It's something you can't really try unless you go out there. There is no such place similar to the open ocean.

The first idea was to just do a shorter distance, hard cause there is lots of current, but the initial plan was to cross from Cuba to Mexico. The idea didn't work as logistics, customs, and all the bureaucratic paperwork seemed like a nightmare.

So looking at the map, why not doing it in my country crossing from Baja to the west coast, distance seemed long... but doable. Then I looked into the Guinness information and saw that this distance would break the one already established (220nm) so why not try. :) Only one goal in mind and lots of mental attitude, just a fighter can do this.

Attempting a new GWR, would also attract a lot of media in Mexico, just the exact thing I needed to call the attention of many big companies who can donate or sponsor my Olympic Campaign through London 2012.

So that's the name of my project, all in one: The Challenge 2012.

2- How long have you been sailing and how did you start?

I started sailing at age 7, at a lake near Mexico City called Valle de Bravo. (150 km drive more or less 2 hrs). It all started when my sister met a little Danish friend at school whose parents became very good friends of mine. They loved sailing of course, as all Scandinavian people do, so told my mom and dad they should go to the lake and check it out. So that's how it all started, my parents started to windsurf and my sister and I went to Optimist lessons during the weekends.

They never thought this sport would become my life, they just introduced sailing to me as a weekend activity and I guess they never imagined what was about to happen.

But on a high level I can say I started to sail at age 19, just a year before I went to Sydney 2000 in the Europe Class.

Economical support from the Sport Institutes and Federations is quite hard to achieve in my country, you first have to get the results, once you have a certain level then they start supporting. The structure of the Federation also is something that has a lot of room of opportunity. We don't have national coaches or anything like that so sailing at high level requires a lot nuts and a lot of traveling to be able to sail with other good athletes and hire a coach which becomes really expensive as there is not a very big fleet of boats (have to say that its beginning to finally grow) who want to share the costs for a coach. Or a coach who wants to live in Mexico, that ... even harder to find.

For this reason I believe my journey as an athlete has been much harder than many other sailors I compete with, and reason it has taken me such a long time to achieve what I have and what I will in the next few years.

3-Who has been the most influential in your sailing career?

Well, I think there is not only one, my family of course, they've been so supportive, it's incredible. On the good and the bad situations they've been always there. None of them into sports, but the three have been incredible through the whole journey.

4-What did you do mentally to prepare for sailing 300nm unassisted?

Doing a lot of visualization and meditation. Lots of yoga as well. But basically I guess it was a matter of believing I would do it no matter what happened. I knew I had to be prepared for whatever got in the way and keep fighting no matter what; even if I had to paddle to the coast I could do it.

5-What did you do physically to prepare for sailing 300nm unassisted?

The normal training I do for my fitness was perfect though I did increase the resistance part on cardio. As I needed a really good base to be able to hold on for such a long time. Also lots of work for back and abs, same position for 3 days was a tough thing so needed a strong core and a strong lower and upper back for sure.

6- What nutrition did you take?

This was a big issue; I had so many people trying to get ideas and theories. It became a bit of everything, a mix of many ideas into one. The main thing was to have something easy to eat, that if wet I could still eat it too, so bars were the way to go, Cliff bars and Power Bars, Fruit that was easy to store, apples, oranges. Dry fruit. Some candy for the sugar in case I needed it.

The second main thing was that I needed something that kept the balance on the intake so some shakes (meal replacements) were in my bag of goodies too.

7-What made you decide to take the drinks and nutrition you did?

It was a mix of talking to several people, nutritionists, sports fitness coaches, experienced athletes. Michael Blackburn was one of my contacts for some ideas, he definitely gave me a good feedback about his journey few years ago for nutrition and also for clothing.

But also training and testing some of the products prior to the event was crucial.

8-Did you stretch or do any sort of physical or mental activity during your sail?

It actually all went really quick! But yes, I for sure did some stretching, hamstrings, quads, lower back, squatted some times to get the knees moving more, sailed standing up a bit too.

Many people have asked me about my thoughts during the journey, they as many others still believe I had much time to kill, but the real thing is that on a laser I didn't have much time to think, I was working the boat the whole time, very focused on my compass as no GPS was longer working, trying to get the boat going fast without spending too much energy. I knew water was low and that I still had a long way to go. It felt so good being present the whole time, it was a fantastic experience, I enjoyed it very much, saw many

things I just had imagined before, big flying fish, dolphins, shark, lots of plankton at night (whale season, luckily didn't hit one), huge waves, no wind, big breeze, a bit of all.

9-What was your scariest moment?

I didn't had a scary moment, but for sure the first night was my welcome to the big blue ocean I was really tired after 15 hrs straight sailing with no sleep, big waves, big breeze, I was almost falling asleep, stopped for a bit to shake my head and recover somehow, went to the mast for one more jacket as it was pretty cold by then when I lost control with the big waves and capsized. Got super angry cause now I was completely wet, cold and I didn't wanted to risk hypothermia, which would be the end of the attempt. The bag where I had my dry cloth got soaked, as the zipper was open when I was trying to get the stuff out! Luckily I thought that could happen and I had a security bag inside this one, sealed, with some dry gear in it that saved my life. Changed as quick as I could to have at least my chest dry with some new wetsuit vest and a new dry lycra. Fantastic. But I still had to keep going as now I had to keep myself warm by moving. So my chances of trying to sleep got back to zero. Though it was impossible mission for me to do that as the waves in this part of the ocean are crazy wild, they come from all directions as 2 different mass of water meet at that same place, The Sea of Cortez and The Pacific Ocean... nice timing of mine to be crossing those at that time of the night, crazy fun.

The second biggest challenge on that same night was when I definitely couldn't keep going, that might've been at 4 am, maybe 2 hrs after I capsized. I was falling asleep, my eyes would close and my head would fall down! The wind was still strong somewhere between 18 knots and big crazy waves. So the next plan was how to sleep on those conditions. Solution was to get the sea anchor out and tie it to the back of the boat (that was the only way to keep the boat stable (trained that a couple of times), not from the bow as it wouldn't keep the laser head to wind). The problem here was that the waves would crash on top of the boat and the cockpit would fill with water anyway, so whatever, I didn't really care at that stage, I had to stop and try to sleep at least 20 mins.

Indeed when I woke up the sun was about to come out, the sky was orange, it was a fantastic feeling knowing the sun would keep me warm during the day. I was really cold by then and the next "good" news was that my Gps had been floating in the cockpit while I was asleep... so... it died!

So now a new challenge to the Challenge... physically demanding trip, mentally draining, and now stress added to the equation as now I didn't had a clue of where I was!! I knew my target was somewhere between 105 and 110, but that was it, and with such a distance those 5 degrees can mean such a different point on land.

So kept following that angle until I met the Maria's Islands which are maybe 60 nm from Bahia de Banderas and I knew I could now head on 90-95 deg and I could be if not in Bahia de Banderas a bit north, a place where I've sailed lots before and knew the coast line very well so good news 😊.

10- In your blog you mentioned hallucinating; do you think this was due to mostly lack of sleep, nutritional deficiency or both?

Yes definitely the lack of sleep was one factor; I also was not carrying a watch so never knew the time or how much I was sleeping for, but the guys who were in the security boat told me I had less than 3 hr sleep in total! That means I was awake, full concentration and mentally and physically going hard for 62 hrs.

I was dehydrated and cold, 2 factors that don't get along pretty well and can risk hypothermia easier, cramping and lack of focus.

11-Looking back would you have prepared physically any differently? Nutritionally any differently?

Nutrition wise for sure I would change a lot of stuff, in this attempt In the end I couldn't eat one more bar, they got me heart burn really bad and was tired of them after eating those for 2 days straight. I would carry more fruit and some cans with the meal replacement powder easier to prepare or mix with water.

Only mistake I did was to mix 2 of my camelbags with electrolytes which had a tiny bit of protein, this went bad after maybe 20 hrs, so at least 4 of my 12 liters of water were thrown out of the boat... That also contributed to getting so dehydrated so quick, I was not drinking enough thinking the journey would take longer as after that first night, the 2 next days during daytime I had really light winds which made things so hard mentally.

12-Overall what did you learn most from this experience?

Persistence was key but what I'm most happy for is that I never doubted on me. The trust I had on myself was fantastic, that for sure is one of the best achievements of this experience. It was like being so confident that I could surpass any obstacle that could get in the way. I knew the risk involved, and I knew I had to take care of myself in order to finish the journey safely. The other thing that I'm really happy for is that I enjoyed every second of it all, even during the hardest times and even being so fatigued it was exactly what I wanted to go through, I wanted to push my limits far beyond I could imagine and what I discovered is that yes, it's tough to get to them but there is still so much to keep pushing and discovering about myself. It's amazing how the mind works. That last night where I got very fatigued, so dehydrated that I can't quite remember it all, I had a moment of almost quitting. I was sailing in circles cause I was falling asleep, I'm pretty sure I did some zombie sailing at the end, eyes closed and only instincts working there. I remember waking up from one of those small naps, feeling completely wet, tired and very cold, I couldn't feel my feet and my hands were numb (almost with hypothermia by then) and when I woke up I thought I was sleeping, that I was living a dream, a dream that felt very real, and what I felt wasn't really happening, but the sure thing was that I felt so miserable, so cold, wet, felt the water hitting the boat and me and the wind blowing hard and I didn't wanted to be there at all. I remember closing my eyes hard like trying to get up from that bad dream. The story is that at some point in the middle of that last night I got close to one of the support boats and

started telling them I didn't wanted to keep sailing. Saying hey please I need to get off I don't want to do this anymore!!!! I tried to get the centerboard out, but with the security line I had for it went right down making a big noise which I guess woke me up from that state of mind. I then realized where I was. I held my head with both hands, elbows on my knees and stayed there for maybe a minute talking to myself and this was the best lesson of it all: "You can do it, keep fighting, there are no limits!", next thing I was sailing again working the boat as good as I could until I saw the coast guard boat, that meant only one thing!!! I was on the right track!! And only 10 nm from my goal ☺!!!! I've never felt that good ever before!

13- What's next for you? What goals are you out to conquer?

Well this experience just brought some crazier ideas to my head in order to find those limits and what is beyond them, but that can wait some time.

First is to keep training hard for London 2012, that's my main focus and goal for the short term. Of course there is a lot to achieve in the mean time during the events of each year which include some important regional Games which will give me some economical support from my Sport Institute.

Also there are small challenges which involve helping the younger talented Mexican sailors, which I believe we have plenty, thing is I don't want them to climb the same mountain that I had to, I would like to make their path a bit easier with what I've learned through all this journey as a top international sailor from Mexico.

I hope this will inspire sailors and non-sailors alike to dream and dream big. I have always said that most of us never push our bodies hard enough to really see what we can accomplish. It's more than we think...so push yourself a little and see what happens. You might just be surprised!

Please support Tania in her quest for the gold. You can follow her at www.taniaeliascalles.com or www.eldesafio2012.org . You will be supporting a sailing dream and a beautiful person.

SAILFIT creates fitness and nutrition programs using mind-body techniques to enhance sport performance. Each program is created specifically to the individual. Contact Meka at meka@sailfit.com for more information or go directly to our website www.sailfit.com.