

"Five days to go and we saw those whales and it was just a special moment and it got our morale back up," Krauskopf said. "It helped us put things in perspective."

The Anne crossed the finish line at about 9:30 p.m. Wednesday, with Krauskopf and Alviar popping red flares and Matson holding the U.S. flag aloft. They had won the three-person crew division and become the first triple-crewed boat to complete the race.

They also became the first Texans to finish, having been dubbed admirals in the Texas Navy before the race by the Texas Navy Association.

The Anne completed the voyage in 49 days, 14 hours and 4 minutes, achieving the crew's goal of crossing in under 50 days.

The crew set out Dec. 14 from San Sebastian de La Gomera on the island of Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the Canary Islands, off the coast of North Africa.

Calling themselves the American Oarsmen, the crew ended their voyage at Nelson's Dockyard English Harbour, Antigua and Barbuda.

The Anne finished fourth out of 12 boats.

Matson, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate and crew captain, said the crew rowed in two-hour shifts. He rowed alone on one shift and the other two rowed and slept at the same time for the entire voyage.

The voyage was toughest on Krauskopf and Alviar because of their close proximity on the 22-foot craft, built for two.

"Eventually you are going to grind and find some friction point," Alviar said. Yet they always were able to put their differences aside. "It's just realizing you can always work through a problem," he said.

The other mental challenge was the tedium. "It was definitely one of the hardest things I've been through, not only as a physical challenge but just as much mental," Krauskopf said.

The Anne ran into a storm early on, but for Krauskopf and Alviar, the worst part of the trip was the misery from the unexpected cold. Even though they were in warm latitudes, they were soaked by intermittent rain, then chilled by the wind. At times it was so bad that Krauskopf and Alviar abandoned the oars and huddled toward the bow. "We had a few rainy nights and storms so cold and debilitating you would not be able to row," Alviar said.

Said Krauskopf, "You had your smoldering hot days followed by the darkest, coldest days you could imagine."

Matson spoke with his crewmates at shift changes, but spent most of the day alone. "I had waterproof headphones, podcasts and books on tape," he said.

At the end of each shift they were exhausted and sleep came easily.

I think the most difficult for all of us was just sitting," Matson said. "Sitting 12 hours a day, the bottom of your hip joint rubbing into the seat. You get sores on your backside. One of the toughest things was just getting out of bed and sitting." Their hands chafed and raw, their backsides covered with sores from the constant rocking of the rowing motion, they despaired of catching the boat ahead in the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge. "It put a funk on the push and we kind of lost morale," Krauskopf said.

Then they saw whales.

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The suffering was counterbalanced by the moments of beauty as they encountered giant sea turtles, dolphins and, on three occasions, whales.

The gazed in wonder at the sunrises and sunsets, coal-black nights filled with more stars than they had ever seen and a sea at times as placid as a pond. Once during a squall, the clouds cut off every beam of light.

"It was the blackest I've ever seen in my life," Matson said. "That was pretty amazing."

Krauskopf said there were so many moments of beauty he could not recall them all.

"It was amazing that we got to see the things we did," he said.

When the Anne finally hove into the dock at English Harbour, the three crewmates could barely walk as they struggled onto the dock.¹² Matson's wife, Sami, his daughter Morgan, 7, and his son Cooper, 6, were waiting for him. He wobbled up to Morgan like a drunken sailer and took her in his arms, fulfilling his promise to give her his first hug.

Alviar made his way unsteadily to his boyfriend, Stanley Lewis, dropped to one knee, and proposed. Then he slipped onto Lewis's finger a ring made of carbon fiber and silver, symbolizing the carbon fiber used in paddles and rowboats that are a part of both of their lives.

There was no one to greet Krauskopf and he tottered to a barricade holding back onlookers. One of them handed him a cold beer, a pleasure he had been fantasizing about during the entire voyage.

All three say they are glad they made the passage, but are unlikely to repeat the experience, at least not in the Atlantic