

Olympic gold medallist, Alex Gregory wears **Joules** tweed jacket and grey v-neck



OAR'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Olympic rower Alex Gregory is quitting the sport but you haven't heard the last of him, says *HUGH FRANCIS ANDERSON*

With five consecutive world championship victories and two Olympic gold medals, Alex Gregory MBE, is one of the most successful British rowers in history. A devout father of three young children, the 32-year-old Olympian has not only trained for

over four hours a day, seven days a week, for the past 15 years, but has also managed to support a young family. With his name now firmly seated next to the likes of Sir Steve Redgrave and Sir Matthew Pinsent, Gregory has made the decision to hang up his oar, but this isn't the last we're going to see of him.

I meet Gregory at Chiltern Firehouse, Marylebone, one bitter December evening and, as I enter, I'm met with a beaming smile, a warm handshake and a demeanour so gentle I'm taken aback. I know immediately that I'm in the presence of greatness. I'm curious to know how it feels to be crowned Olympic champion in Britain's most successful boat, the coxless four: 'In London 2012, it was a relief. It showed that the eight years in the build up to it had paid off,' says Gregory. 'In Rio, it was a relief that I hadn't messed up the race, and it was elation because I'd done everything I'd set out to do in my sport and my life up to that point. At age 32, I had ticked it off, I'd done it, and I was happy with that. It was pure satisfaction.' Although Gregory's career has been a tumultuous one, and his time sculling (two oars) bore few fruits for Great Britain, when he moved to sweep (one oar) shortly after Beijing 2008, it was to immediate success. 'I went as the spare to Beijing, and it was as spare that I filled in for some of the sweep guys. It was then that I realised I was more natural, confident and comfortable in a sweep position. I was sitting on the sideline and I took a step back and looked at everything I'd done and what I was doing, and decided in that moment to move to sweep.' And he never looked back.

Beginning his career at Evesham Rowing Club at the age of 17, Gregory soon fell in love with the sport and, when he moved to Reading University to read Geography in 2003, he was selected for the Lottery Funded Start programme, a scheme that identifies, recruits and develops individuals with little or no prior rowing experience to become Olympians, and it certainly paid off.

'When I started rowing, I used to say that I wanted to go to the Olympics and win gold, but they're just words, just what you're supposed to say,' says Gregory. 'It was only being in Beijing as a reserve that I felt what it meant to be at the Olympics. I saw the parents' reactions to seeing their children win gold medals, and that blew me away. That was the turning point that made me realise what it really means. So when I came home, the motivation was completely different. The words finally meant something.'



Alex wears Woolrich fur collar jacket



says Gregory. 'But the greatest feeling was the weekend when I returned from Rio as it was our first full weekend ever together, and it was a revelation. We'd never had that time before, I would always train on Saturday, maybe have the occasional Sunday off, but never a whole weekend. We could never go away, it's completely changed our lives.'

Alongside raising a family with his partner Emily, Gregory is pursuing a whole lot more. A patron of the British Exploring Society, and a man obsessed with the wilderness, Gregory strives towards his desires. 'My real passion is the outdoors and wildlife. So, somehow, I want to intertwine that with my life now by using the skills I've developed throughout my rowing career. I have an interest in people, in what they're capable of and how far they'll go to get something they want, and so I want to head down the outdoors, adventure, possibly even television route, because that will allow me pursue my dreams.' It was on a trip to Svalbard as a teenager with the British Exploring Society that Gregory discovered his love for adventure. 'It was where I studied glacial melt-water for two weeks and it was just incredible,' recounts Gregory with a smile. 'Next year I'm hoping to walk through the Kalahari Desert. I'd love for it to be televised, and hopefully get young people involved too, to give them experiences. I feel it's sort of my duty. I was a young person at a non-rowing school who was given an opportunity and it changed my life, so that's something I'd like to do for young people now.'

Age wise, Gregory certainly has another Olympiad in him, so I'm interested to know why he made the decision to retire. 'Enough's enough, I'm satisfied with everything, I've done what I set out to do – perhaps even more – and I don't feel the need to carry on. Rowing is very linear and I've done it for 15 years, now I want to see what it's like to push myself in a different way, in situations where things can change and I don't know what's going to happen.' Of course, having three young children to support must be incredibly draining, not only emotionally and physically, but also mentally, especially when you're so often away from home. 'Yes, it certainly changed the way I saw rowing; it changed the way I trained and it really helped me out, there's no question about it,'

Since his retirement, Gregory's world has changed beyond recognition, and his home life now perfectly balances his love for the outdoors with his newly reclaimed fatherhood. 'We live in a little village between Henley and Wallingford, in a cottage down the end of a lane, and it's lovely,' says Gregory, 'I love our country life, it's really healthy. Jasper, our eldest, really loves going for long walks in the woods with our two dogs, and I love that too. It's what I grew up doing, and it's so important.'

With numerous partnerships and sponsors behind him, a robust mental resolution to strive towards greatness off the rowing lake, and a deeply rooted passion for the wilderness, there is only one direction Alex Gregory is going, and that is up. ■

NOT A QUESTION OF SPORT

Who would you want to sit next to on a long haul flight? David Attenborough. He was sitting behind me at a screening recently, but I couldn't bring myself to speak to him. Hopefully one day I will. What is your perfect winter evening? In a log cabin, sitting in front of a fire that I've made myself, drinking hot chocolate and reading adventure stories to the children. That would be spot-on. What is your favourite book? My Family and Other Animals by Gerald Durrell. I absolutely love that book. It really inspired me. As a child I had tanks and cages in my bedroom and I wanted to be just like him.