

Francesco Esposito

When people ask: ‘Who was it that started the great renaissance of Italian rowing?’ the chances are your mind may go back to Italy’s most famous brothers, Carmine and Giuseppe Abbagnale. But it was Francesco Esposito who was there before them. Francesco’s first Gold in 1980 was the start in a long line of Italian triumphs that have never abated. And the little sculler from Stabia was there throughout what was to be a magical era for the Azzuri.

In fact, Francesco’s nine Golds, together with single Silver and Bronze medals were won over the next fourteen years. Italian crews won Gold in every year save one during that period. And it was fitting that a man who was to spend much of his life in the shadow of Giuseppe and Carmine was to receive the Thomas Keller medal a year before them. More than that, he received it on the medal rostrum at Lake Lanier during the Atlanta Olympics: it meant he was there to cheer on Agostino, a third Abbagnale, who that year was to win yet another sculling Gold for Italy.

Being there would have meant a lot to Francesco. Like the Abbagnales, he was from Napoli, in the south of Italy. When he first started most of Italian rowing was based in the north. But Francesco was to show that southerners could break that mould. It was a great legacy for someone who came from a poor family. Outwardly Francesco was a very simple man, yet underneath, he was determined to show the world what he could do.

Perhaps that’s why he used to set himself impossible tasks. Giovanni Postiglione remembers: “Franco set himself up to be the Abbagnale’s sparring partner. He was always there against them in a single scull. And you know what, despite his size, this little man always thought he was stronger than them.”

That determination was to pay off. But for a long time Francesco could not break into the national team. Then his coach persuaded La Mura to look at this young lion from the Stabia club. With a little help from Thor Nilsen, the partnership of Esposito and Verroca was born: from 1980-1984, they won five straight Golds in lightweight doubles.

Francesco was back on top of the podium in 1988, this time with a different partner, Enrico Gandola. And at the Milan championships, he was to have one of his best and fastest performances, taking his sixth Gold. By that time, Francesco’s attitude was rubbing off on others in the team. And one of them remembers: “Francesco was there with the new lightweights, helping them to develop the strength of character to fight in races, like he could.”

That work paid off, when Francesco moved into the Italian quadruple scull, which won Golds in ’90 and ’92. But he was to win his last Gold in Indianapolis during 1994 and it was in his favourite boat, the double scull. Not only that but it was with a third partner: Michelangelo Crispi.

Francesco was watched there by Thor Nilsen, a man who has seen many special rowers in his time. But of Francesco he was to say: “He was only 1.68m tall but he rowed like a man of two metres.” It was entirely fitting that this giant of Italian rowing should become the first lightweight ever to win the Thomas Keller medal.