

Agostino Abbagnale

Exceptional grace, power and dynamism exuded from every pore of Agostino Abbagnale's skin. They were unique qualities that the quiet farmer's son from Naples used to turn a good boat into an exceptional one. His crew-mates and opponents alike knew that beneath his often silent exterior, lay someone who could endure great pain, would struggle against illness and yet still win three Olympic Gold medals.

Just before the Seoul Olympics, coaches and rowers alike were buzzing with the news that the Italians had produced a stunningly fast quad -faster than anything the world had yet seen. When people asked why the boat was so quick, they were told simply: "It's the best Abbagnale brother, Agostino, who is sitting in the stroke seat.

In 1988, Agostino, the youngest of the three brothers, already had a silver medal in the eights to his name but the margin of his quad's triumph in Seoul, was nevertheless remarkable. It made them the crew of the regatta and set a new standard for the event in the process.

Davide Tizzano, Agostino's friend and crewmate explained: 'You know, we were only together for 100 days. But to row behind Agostino was something special. That race in Seoul was the easiest in our lives – the feeling was easy and without pain.'

After the medal ceremony, the normally withdrawn Agostino, who had trouble swimming, was so overcome that he jumped into the water to celebrate with his crewmates. Unfortunately, he landed on top of Tizzano; Agostino knocked the medal out of Tizzano's hand, while his crewmate had to help the non-swimmer to the bank. "You know it took scuba divers 2 days to find my medal, recounts Tizzano.

After Seoul, the two men went their separate ways but until they teamed up again in 1996, their lives played out very different stories.

Tizzano went to crew in the America's Cup, while Agostino instead endured a recurring battle against thrombophlebitis -the inflammation of a vein with the formation of a blood clot. It was to force him out of the sport for five years.

But when the two men teamed up for the double sculls event in 1996, it was as if they had never been apart. Tizzano recalls that from the first outing, 'The same feeling as the Seoul quad was there straight away. But the manner of their gold medal triumph in Atlanta was a different matter: "That race was very, very painful", recalls Tizzano.

Among all the Italian boats at that regatta, Agostino's double was the one that performed. And the reason, Tizzano explains, was not hard to understand: "We did a different programme from the rest of the team. In the morning, we'd do the same session but in the afternoon, we went off and did our own thing – no coach."

Undoubtedly, a coach would have been frustrated with another of Agostino's remarkable characteristics -he refused, to talk about a race until just before the 'Go'. Tizzano recalls:

“If I tried to discuss tactics with him, he would tell me to be quiet. The only time we talked any tactics was during the call-over, just before the race begun.”

Between Atlanta and Sydney, Agostino picked up another two gold in the quad and won his third Olympic Gold, this time in the bow seat of the quadruple and at the age of 34. He had long won the total respect of all his teammates.

The regard he was held in was shown by the continued respect shown him after unjustified allegations made against him and other Italian rowers just after the Olympics. Italy’s Technical Director Dr. Giuseppe la Mura pointed out the ludicrousness of accusing Agostino of taking a particular drug in combination with his daily anticoagulant medication: To take this drug would be suicide for him... as the two drugs are a lethal combination.”

It was Agostino’s thrombosis condition, which flared up again in 2004 and prevented him from competing in the Italian team in Athens.

But his old partner, Tizzano, has no regrets: “You know the one race people talk about with the Abbagnale brother’s pair is the one they lost in the Olympics of 1992. But for Agostino, there are only his three Olympic Golds – this is much better.”