

Towards the end of his life Thomi Keller, who was FISA's charismatic President from 1966-89 often talked about creating an award for a rower, or sculler. This would be in recognition of an outstanding career. In August 1989, as the World Rowing community gathered for the World Championships in Bled, nobody had any clue that this would be Thomi's last major event. But Thomi still had ideas about who might be the first to receive such a prestigious award. Indeed, in Bled, there were plenty of rowing legends around, whose records seemed to fit the bill: Perti Karpinnen, the Finn with 3 Olympic sculling Golds was still competing in a double scull and his great rival Peter Michael Kolbe had only just retired. But Thomi's opinion was clear; he thought instead, that the model for such an award would be a man, whose thrilling races, indomitable spirit and incredible resilience had captivated rowers from his first medal in a coxed four way back in 1971, to his last appearance, eighteen years later in the final of the quadruple sculls in Bled. That man was none other than Alf Hansen.

If you had seen Alf Hansen stood next to any of his rivals, your first thought might have been to question how somebody of Alf's size could possibly compete. But then you might have noticed the intensity of his gaze from those steely blue eyes; his tanned and weather-beaten skin honed after countless hours of training in all weathers and you would understand that this man was something special. If you were lucky enough to see him scull, you might have been aware of his ease of movement on the water, so that his shell just seemed to run and run for ever; Alf had many skills.

Indeed Alf could have represented Norway in a number of different sports, not least cross country skiing, which formed the basis of Alf's formidable endurance. So it's no surprise to learn that many of Alf's medals were won with a fantastic sprint for the line. The first of his seven World and Olympic Golds was won in Nottingham in 1975. Alf, together with his older brother Frank had just failed to beat the fancied East Germans, Schmied and Kreuziger the year before in Lucerne. But this time, the Norwegian's last 500m was too strong. In the Montreal Olympics, the following year, the Hansen's winning margin was even more emphatic, possibly helped by their demanding endurance programme set by their Swedish trainer Thor Nilson.

They were back again two years later. But their win in Karapiro was something special for Alf. He had decided to build his own house in a suburb of Oslo and in between his work as an electrician, fitting in his training, he laboured to complete his new dwelling. It was a ridiculous schedule and his health suffered as did his relations with the Federation. But victory was all the sweeter when on the victory stage, he and his brother mischievously tossed the Norwegian President who had come to congratulate them into the lake.

By now, Alf was a hero in Norway. With another Gold in 1979 and despite Norway's boycott of the Moscow Olympics, people would often stop him in the street just to say hello. And on the water, Alf was building a new partnership, this time with Rolf Thorsen. In 1982 on the Rotsee, they won a dramatic gold, sculling down the East Germans in the

last few metres. In characteristic style, Alf celebrated his Gold by running up Mount Pilatus the next day.

In fact, Alf was one of the most friendly and sociable of rowers: a regular outside Pickwicks, the bar where rowers congregate in Lucerne. You could always find him at the last night party. But often, he was a friendly face who rowers would be glad to seek out and spend a few minutes by the side of the lake. He was by now, a legend in the world of rowing and seemed determined to write more chapters.

He added others towards the end of his career. While he was fast approaching 40, Alf was a key member of the Norwegian quadruple scull, which won two silvers, including another Olympic medal in Seoul.

Alf was a man who seemed as if his own 'race' would go on for ever. It was almost as if he had somehow taken hold of a pair of magic sculls, that he could never let go of. But let go he did after Bled. He received the first Thomas Keller medal beside Lake Barrington, Tasmania in 1990. It was at the bottom of a deep gorge and access was by a steep and winding road. As the coach wound its tortuous way to the top of the hill, I still remember the surprised cry of a young rower: "Who's that nutter running up the hill behind us?" There was only one man it could have been: Alf Hansen.