

Carmeno Abbagnale

There is a line in the stirring Italian National Anthem, which speaks of ‘Fratelli D’Italia’: the brothers of Italy. Such was the profile of the Abbagnale brothers, that when Carmeno, and his brother Giuseppe, were almost unbeatable on the world stage, the minds of many Italian’s singing or listening to that Anthem would automatically think of the two men who powered their coxed pair to 9 World and Olympic Golds.

While Carmeno, who rowed at bow in the pair was the younger and quieter of the two brothers, it was his longevity that saw him win second place the ‘all-time’ medal table, just behind Steven Redgrave. Carmeno outlasted his older brother by one year, finishing his career in 1994, with a silver in that event but with a different partner. But when he first came out of the Junior Championships of 1980, there was little doubt in anyone’s mind that Carmeno would team up with his partner.

But Carmeno’s start to the sport was not particularly auspicious. His father was a farmer and Carmeno was expected to help with the chores around the farm, not far from Pompeii in Southern Italy. So there was no obvious connection with water sports in the family, Indeed, when Carmeno followed his brother into the sport that was to change his life, he could not even swim.

But it didn’t take long for Carmeno to make an impression. Teaming up with Giuseppe for the coxed pairs in Munich for the 1981 Championships, the two swept to victory and started a domination of the event that was to last a decade. Gianni Postiglione, who was a coach to the Italian team, remembers the quiet presence and authority that Carmeno had in the boat: “If Giuseppe was like a lion in the boat, then Carmeno was a panther. He was always there but you couldn’t really find his presence.”

Carmeno’s constant presence behind his brother in any ‘fight to the death’ was a key factor in the success of Italy’s most famous rowing combination. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the Seoul Olympics of 1988, when the Abbagnale brothers pulled off maybe their greatest victory beating Britain’s Steven Redgrave and Andy Holmes to take their second Olympic Gold medal in a very fast time. It was fitting that both Carmeno and Giuseppe were awarded their Thomas Keller medals together on the victory pontoon in Aigubilette, during the 1997 Championships