

Giuseppe Abbagnale

Think of an Olympic and World Champion oarsman, who seems quiet, almost gentle on the outside, yet underneath has immense power and on top of that a heart which will allow him to face almost any challenge. There are two names that spring to mind: Steve Redgrave and Giuseppe Abbagnale. And between 1986-88, as Redgrave tried to muscle in on Giuseppe's territory of the coxed pair, these two great rowers fought for superiority on the World Championship stage. At the end of some unforgettable races, the score between them stood at 2-1 to Giuseppe and his brother Carmine. It was their domination of the coxed pair's event over ten years, that saw Giuseppe win the Thomas Keller medal in 1987.

Gianni Postiglione, who as a coach to the Italian team saw more than most of the Gentle giant remembers how Giuseppe could explode in action while under pressure on the water: "Giuseppe was like a lion, very aggressive, strong and powerful." Perhaps this was not surprising for someone who lived in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius. Giuseppe had a physique to match his power paid for it with hard labour. His father was a farmer, who obliged Giuseppe from a young age to help him work on the land round his farm near Pompeii. It built him up but meant that it was difficult for him to leave and spend time training.

Though rowing was not an obvious choice for Giuseppe, it soon became apparent how fast he could move a coxed pair and in 1981, his coach La Mura made him switch partners to row with his brother Carmine, who had just rowed as a junior. The two of them stormed to victory in the 1981 Championships.

If anyone thought it was a flash in the pan, they were to have a rude awakening, as the Abbagnale brothers stamped their personality on this 'Hard man's' event as no one has done before, or since. In thirteen years, they were to win the event nine times and add three silvers and a bronze to their medal tally. Their style was always to lead from the front and the lead they built up was more than just the sheer power that Giuseppe had available. Underneath, there was a silky smoothness to the way their boat moved.

These two qualities were most apparent in the Seoul Olympic of 1988, when Giuseppe's boat headed Steve Redgrave's pair to take his second Olympic medal. Postiglione remembers it well: "This was Giuseppe's best performance, the boat was moving really well." Performances like that had a big impact on the Italian team. Not only was Giuseppe a tremendous presence in the team, with a huge appetite for a demanding training programme but his success also helped rowing blossom in the South of Italy.

All this helped the Abbagnale brothers become national celebrities. It was a status and respect that Giuseppe was to retain, when he received over 90% of the votes in the Italian Federation's election. The brother's last Olympics in 1992, saw one of rowing's most dramatic races ever, when another set of brothers from Britain, the Searles, cut down a

huge Italian lead on the line. Giuseppe was as sporting in defeat as he was in victory: A role model for all those around him.