

Kathleen Heddle

Every so often, an athlete comes along, who is able to completely dominate the sport, not only in their country but also on the world stage. Kathleen Heddle was just such a person. From 1991 to 1996, whether rowing or sculling, she was practically unstoppable. Among her 9 Championship medals, she won 3 Olympic Golds. But more than that, this woman achieved everything with a quiet humility. Kay Worthington, her team mate in 1992 remembers: “She was very modest, understated, yet despite the fact she was clearly the best, Kathleen was always a team player.”

This quiet and private person was able to assert her presence with her physical dominance of any training piece, of any length. Worthington recalls the period from January to April 1992, when the Canadian Olympic Squad under Al Morrow trained relentlessly in pairs against each other: “There was a board on the wall throughout that time which showed the result of every competitive piece. No matter who she was with, Kathleen never lost a single piece –even the bottom person could win with Kathleen.”

It was not perhaps surprising that an introvert like Heddle would strike up a successful partnership with one of the most mercurial women in the Canadian Squad, Marnie McBean. Together these two women not only dominated the Coxless pairs in the Barcelona Olympics but decide to switch to a double scull –after Heddle had taken a two year break from the sport. They duly won that event in the Atlanta Olympics two years later.

There was an incredible dynamic in the partnership and Worthington remembers: “Marnie sometimes could go on in the group but one word from Kathleen and she would shut up.” Strength like that allowed these two women to double up in the Olympic Regattas. Heddle picked up yet another Olympic Gold, stroking the eight in Barcelona and four years later added a bronze to her gold in the doubles by stroking the quad in Atlanta.

But Heddle also showed her abilities in other ways. Her calmness during the summer of 1992, when the Canadian eight lost their stroke-woman through a back injury, was a major factor in the crew finding its confidence again. The gift of Heddle to spread calmness amongst those around her was recognised by the Canadian rowers when they elected her to be a FISA athlete representative, a role she started in 1997.

Throughout all her work, Kathleen Heddle was good company, with at times, a wonderful sense of humour. She was awarded the Thomas Keller medal in St Catherines during the 1999 World Championships. Then, she spoke with great dignity, thanking all those that had helped her throughout her career.