

Marnie McBean

In modern rowing, the most successful women's crews are full of Amazons, very tall, strong and dynamic athletes. So when you put someone up against them with the relatively slight physique of 5 foot 8 inches (even with a fiery and feisty personality), the chances are there wouldn't be much of a contest. But Marnie McBean was to become one of the most successful rowers of all time.

Six World and Olympic Golds, let alone a silver in the hugely competitive event of single sculling is a remarkable achievement. Kay Worthington, herself a double Olympic Champion, underlines this saying: "For her to have achieved the things she has is completely amazing."

Marnie herself pointed to the experience of not making the Canadian team in the summer of 1988 as a formative time in her life. She rowed for her club throughout that period and said: "I learned so much from that and my confidence became very solid ". That experience saw her become the fastest starboard side rower in the Canadian squad the next year and therefore a natural partner for Kathleen Heddle. In the World Championships in Vienna in 1991 the combination took Gold with a world record.

Marnie's contribution to this effort was on many levels. With her 'firecracker' nature, she was the ideal foil to Heddle's more reserved personality. This powerful cocktail was a practically unstoppable combination. In the Barcelona Olympics, they dominated the pair's event. It was Marnie's first Olympic title and more were to follow. Four years later, in Atlanta, they proved they could do the same – but this time in a double, against the 'all-powerful' Germans.

The qualities of this remarkable woman rubbed off on the rest of the team. Worthington remembers: "Yeah sure Marnie could be frustrating at times but her mental strength, combined with her sheer will and determination made her someone that you really wanted on your side." And Marnie made her presence felt, first as part of the Canadian eight, which won Gold in 1992 and then in the quad, which picked up a Bronze in Atlanta.

But Marnie wanted to see if she could move a boat fast on her own too. The chance came in 1993, when Heddle took a break. It was entirely in her nature that Marnie would take on the very challenging prospect of single sculling. On the Racice course in the Czech Republic, she found the answer. In a great race with Germany's Jana Thieme, Marnie took Silver and proved she had the technical ability and skill to go with her determination.

She brought more to the sport than just her triumphs. Marnie was an articulate and outspoken advocate for athletes' rights. Not only that but she has long since used her energies to help charities in Canada raise money. Given her longevity in the Canadian team from 1989 until 1999 (she didn't race in Sydney due to injury); she was a natural winner of the Thomas Keller Medal in 2002.