

Mike McKay

By Martin Cross

Mick McKay could easily have won the Thomas Keller medal for the quality and longevity of both his Olympic and World Championships medal tally. Starting with a startling win for the Aussie eight in the 1986 worlds, it ended eighteen years later, in Athens with an Olympic bronze. But the impact of McKay's career cannot be measured in numbers, or summed up by these phrases: aggressively competitive; a crew-maker; hugely respected; innovative; controversial... the list could go on.

Indeed, it was and is impossible not to have an opinion about this man. But there is no doubt that the qualities, which the winner of the Thomas Keller medal must have, are to be found abundantly in the person of Mick McKay. Coaches get to see the best and worst sides of their athletes and Noel Donaldson, who nurtured the legendary Oarsome Foursome, of which McKay was a part, could unequivocally say of him: 'There's no doubt that he was the greatest rowing competitor that Australia has seen.'

Many of McKay's Athens crew were still in nursery school, when he started rowing in Victoria's outstanding Under 21 eight in 1984. It was as part of that crew that he struck up a legendary partnership with James Tomkins. At its best, the partnership between them was a perfect balance between the 'yin and the yang': Tomkins' fluid length and dynamism being perfectly complemented by McKay's aggressivity, competitiveness and determination.

The synergy that these two created was the driving force behind the awesome Aussie four, that took two Olympic and two world golds between 1990 and 1996. Tomkins stroked the crew to their first win in Barcelona. But it was McKay's ability to step into the stroke seat for Atlanta that drove the crew on and guaranteed their second Olympic title – and that after a two year career break between 1993 and 1994.

But, as Donaldson points out, McKay's contribution to the success of that crew extended further. Despite some 'Crazy training sessions, 3-4 hours long', the results were not coming. Then, Donaldson explained 'The real turning point came. Mike got us to embark on something really innovative and we set up a kind of business plan for the crew, which helped us set out our mission and clear boundaries.'

It's a measure of the man that he has always sought to add extra dimensions to his skills – he is a qualified teacher and has an MBA. Others, ranging from international business (to whom he is a talented presenter), to Oxford University Boat Club, whom he worked with in 2002, have tried to learn from his life experiences. He has given back to Australian sport, chairing the Australian Olympic Committee's Athlete's Committee and currently sits on the appeals panel. A wider public enjoy his work as a highly respected analytical commentator on Channel Seven TV.

Many probably see his greatest achievements as winning Olympic golds. But Donaldson knows more and explains how it was fierce determination and drive that took McKay and Drew Ginn to a silver medal in the pair in 1998: 'They weren't a natural pair but that achievement was one of his crowning glories.'

Those qualities gave McKay an immediate impact on others. Fellow squad members tried not to start behind him in the gym because, as Donaldson said: 'He'd eat you up, then spit you out.' No doubt, it was sometimes difficult to understand the part of the man, which lay behind the outward display of aggressive self-confidence. But the two eights that medalled in Sydney 2000 and in Athens four years later, knew that it was McKay - the crew builder - who drove them on.

Some of that Athens crew had no doubt been inspired to take up the sport by McKay's earlier deeds and probably realised that having McKay as a fellow crew member was a challenge that they could not shrink from. But no one knew that better than Tomkins. As Donaldson said: 'When I asked Jimmy why he wanted to row with Mike he said "I want him in a crew with me because I know with Mike we'll win!"