

Peter Antonie

“The guy’s just a legend.” Speak to any Aussie involved in rowing about Peter Antonie and the chances are that they will tell you the same thing. It might be enough to have an international rowing career spanning 24 years, with World and Olympic Golds as highlights. But there was much more: Antonie was a lightweight who re-wrote history as a man who could take on and beat the world’s best open-weight rowers. In doing so, he inspired thousands that, with determination, it was possible to do anything.

Paul Reedy, who took bronze with Antonie at the Worlds in Tasmania of 1990 was just such a man, who remembers how it was when he first started rowing with Antonie: “At Melbourne Uni, Ants was a star and I was nervous about rowing with him but he made me feel welcome and valued.”

It soon became clear to Reedy why Antonie was so good: “He was never ever satisfied with where he was and just had this incredible ability to strive and make himself better in any way he could.” That could sometimes be frustrating as Antonie would try out anything from rigging changes to different training programmes in order to pick up 0.25 to 0.5% improvement. But there was no doubting that his energy was infectious.

In lightweight competitions, his finest hour was his singles win over the double World Champion Bjarne Eltang at Nottingham in 1986. He and the Dane were neck and neck until practically the last stroke, when Antonie took one look across and edged his shell in front to snatch Gold. Simon Cox, who later was to become a world lightweight champion for Britain remembers: “It was that fantastic race which made me think I really wanted to do something with this sport.”

But Antonie’s finest result in the singles was in 1991, when rowing in the open-weight category, he took a superb fourth place behind Germany’s Thomas Lange. It was a springboard that Antonie used to launch himself towards his next challenge. And there are none bigger than the Olympic Games. Teaming up with a similarly diminutive Aussie Stephen Hawkins, Antonie stormed the Olympic doubles title in Barcelona ahead of Austria and Holland.

He was 34 and it was the result that Antonie would always be remembered for. But for those that knew him, his resilience was more important. Antonie carried on until he was 42. In fact he was the spare man for the Australian team at the Sydney Olympics. Reedy admired from a distance: “Great Aussie rowers like Jimmy Tomkins made their success look easy. That was never the case with Ants - he had to struggle for everything and Aussies kind of like to see that.”

Through it all, Antonie held down a high-powered job in Melbourne. He also made significant contributions to his sport in other ways. He was an elected member of FISA’s Athletes Commission and his opinion was always sought after in many fields. He was awarded his Thomas Keller medal in 2003.