

Roland Baar

You could never miss Roland Baar during a regatta; not only did he row at stroke in the hugely successful German eight but he was instantly recognisable with his striking blonde hair. Though Baar was never loud and brash, he had very strong opinions and spoke regularly in athlete forums. It was to lead him eventually to membership of the IOC.

Baar was the symbol of the renaissance of eights rowing in first the former West German Republic and then as part of a united Germany. In a real sense, Baar was the leader of a group of men that led the eights of West Germany out of the dark ages and back to a new golden age.

During the period from 1988-1996, Baar would win a total of seven “eights” medals in World and Olympic competition, five of them Gold. But more striking was the way in which this was achieved: with aggressive, high-rating, front-loaded racing, the hallmark of which was a distinctive technical precision which became the envy of other crews.

Though he was part of the German team at the Seoul Olympics the young Baar did not race in the winning German eight. That crew dominated the Games and with a touch of arrogance thought they would be remembered as the best German eight ever. Some of that crew looked down on the new-look German eight, which Baar first led to victory on Lake Bled. But Baar and his crew were to show them that their result was no ‘flash in the pan’.

His crew dominated the event over the next two years, having fantastic head to head races with Mike Spracklen’s new Canadian crew. Both boats liked to win from the front and in the battle of the blast-outs Baar’s approach had the edge.

That was not surprising for an exceptionally determined man. Peter Hoeltzenbein, who won gold with Baar in 1993 recalls: “Roland had a very strong will; he always wanted to win.” More than that, Hoeltzenbein, who rowed in one of the world’s quickest ever pairs recalls: “Roland and his pairs partner Frank Richter were usually the fastest combination in the German eight.”

It was a surprise to the world, let alone Baar, that he could not dominate his second Olympic Games in 1992. Germany had to settle for a Bronze medal in the eights, left behind in a dramatic shoot-out between Canada and Romania. In fact, Baar was never to win the Olympic Gold that he wanted. Perhaps partly because the rest of the World was now copying his and Germany’s style.

But Baar was never far from the front and one of his most striking performances came in the rough conditions of Tampere in 1995, where after a year out of the medals in 1994, Baar drove his crew home ahead of the fancied Dutch and American teams. In Atlanta, it was Baar’s crew who fought though an exceptionally strong field to take Silver.

While he did not always see eye to eye with those in his team, particularly some of his lightweight colleagues, Baar was undoubtedly respected for his abilities. It was entirely appropriate that he was awarded his Thomas Keller medal in Cologne at the 1998 World Championships.