

Sir Steven Redgrave

What is the appeal of rowing's first ever Olympic knight? On the face of it, it seems simple: anybody who could win five consecutive Olympic Golds over a sixteen year period (let alone a barrel full of World Championship titles) demands attention. Yet there is far more to Steven Redgrave's legendary life. His success came despite –some might argue because of: major illnesses, depression and advancing years. Through all that, he achieved consistent standards of excellence and did it while remaining 'an ordinary bloke'. Proof of John Naber's oft quoted axiom that "Olympic champions are ordinary people, who achieve extraordinary things."

In a country that draws more than its fair share of rowers from the privileged classes, Steve's background could not have been more 'ordinary'. His dad was a jobbing builder and Steve went to Marlow's local state school. Undiagnosed Dyslexia was to leave him with few qualifications to show for his time there. But an eagle eyed rowing teacher spotted this latent athleticism and drive –a life in the sport beckoned.

But it needed somebody special to help Steven discover his own potential and it was Mike Spracklen, who coached Steven from the time he was a junior, who was to become his guru. Under Mike's tutelage, Steven hoped to become the Olympic singles Champion by 1988 and it was entirely consistent with this plan that Spracklen used his protégé as part of a coxed four for the Los Angeles Games in 1984. In that combination Redgrave first showed the world that, while he could scull well, in a rowing boat, he could break world records and win Olympic Golds.

He arrived at the Seoul Games, determined to win not one but two Golds. This would be a challenge equal to the abilities in his new pairs combination with Andy Holmes. They had won a coxed Gold in '86 and followed it with a win in the coxless event the following year. The double proved tantalisingly out of reach and left Redgrave with a coxless Gold and his only Olympic bronze in the coxed.

Redgrave's third Olympiad was to prove a difficult one: a painful split with Holmes; silver and bronze medals in successive championships; his first bout of Colitis; two new partners the list could go on. But his relationship with the young Matthew Pinsent was to prove phenomenally successful. Between 1991 & 2000, it brought him a run of 10 straight Olympic and Championship Golds, in pairs and fours. To row with Pinsent Redgrave had not only to learn how to switch from bow to stroke but also had to struggle with swapping sides.

But it was in the run up to his challenge for a 5th Gold in Sydney that the real challenges emerged. By then, Steve not only had a family to look after but his every move was now being reported in the glare of the media. The pressure told as Colitis emerged against the backdrop of Diabetes. It was a combination that would have laid any person low. Indeed Steven suffered from depression during those years. Yet it was a measure of the man together with the support of family, coaches and friends that he was always able to deliver when it mattered.

Super celebrity status followed and the ordinary British public took Steve Redgrave into their hearts as one of their own. It was perhaps a measure of the realisation that if this ordinary guy could achieve those extraordinary things –they could too.