

Thomas Greiner

It says something about the strength of this man that despite winning five Gold medals on the Olympic and World stages, the memory of Thomas Greiner that will linger the longest is the incredible bravery of his assault on the World Coxed pair title in 1986. It left both Greiner and his partner, Stefan Forster prostrate. In fact Greiner was unable to make the medal rostrum to receive his bronze medal. But it left Andy Holmes, one of the men who took Gold in that event saluting the bravery of his opponents: "What fantastic guts that East German pair showed in that race."

It was perhaps no surprise that an athlete with the credentials of Thomas Greiner had risen to the top in the world's toughest and most competitive rowing system. Greiner made his way as part of Dresden's elite rowers, that were to help East Germany dominate the World Championship medals table. But in 1982, when Greiner first made his appearance as the bow man in the World Championship coxed four at Lucerne, East German wins were suffering. New crews from Norway and New Zealand were making their mark. That year though, Greiner's crew were one of only three GDR Golds.

He shone again the following year. Together with the experienced Ulrich Diessner, he shattered the Abbagnale brother's domination of the coxed pairs event. Not only that but in fast tailwind conditions, they went under the magic 6.50 mark and their assault pushed the Italians back into third.

With the uncertainty of the Olympic boycott of 1984, Greiner waited another three years before repeating his gold medal success, this time it was in Copenhagen. There in 1987, he rose to his best form in the engine room of a magical coxless four, which was to set the standard in the event for three years. For East Germany, Greiner's success enabled them return to their Golden years of pre 1980, when they had dominated the coxless fours. In the process Greiner took his first and only Olympic Gold, winning in Seoul.

But in Seoul Greiner must have had more than just a passing glance at the coxed pair of Redgrave and Holmes, who then had to settle for a bronze medal behind the Abbagnale brothers. The British were still trying to prove their credentials as rowing's toughest men by attempting to win the coxless and coxed pairs double. Two years earlier, after their world record breaking row in Lucerne, they had been overwhelming favourites to take their first World title. It was to be held in Nottingham, on their home patch, in what they billed as 'The Hard Man's event': the coxed pairs.

Naturally, Holmes and Redgrave had forgotten to tell Greiner and his partner Olaf Foerster that they were rowing's new 'Hard Men'. The final saw the East Germans boldly take the race on and their boat surged out in front of a class field. They seemed to be making the British look ordinary. It was only in the last few metres that they faltered, managing to hang on for the bronze. Greiner had showed the world that he could row himself to absolute exhaustion.

It was another bronze that was to draw down the curtain on this career of this remarkable oarsman. Fittingly, it was won in Tasmania in 1990, the last time that East Germany's flag was to fly at FISA's championships. Greiner's crew had staged a come back after all the uncertainty that followed Germany's dramatic political revolution of 1989. In the last few strokes of that race, Greiner's four surged through the British to claim another third place and assure his claim to be the second person to be awarded the Thomas Keller medal.