

## Thomas Lange

Thomas Lange was simply one of the greatest single scullers of all time. Technically peerless, he achieved success after success against the worlds greatest. While on the water he was phenomenal and when off it his genuine humility and willingness to be a team-player showed through. His achievements were all the more impressive set against the backdrop not only of East Germany's demise but also a determination to pursue his medical studies.

From the moment Lange burst on the international rowing scene as a junior in 1980, it was clear that the East German system had found a very special athlete. As a sixteen year old in the double sculls, he pushed the favourite boat, stroked by the great Steven Redgrave back into second place. It was the first of his three junior Golds, the next two in the single.

His famous opponent back in 1980, Redgrave, though they never raced again, was to become one of Lange's greatest admirers and said: "Thomas had a special quality about him." It wasn't long before those qualities would be tested in the Senior Championships. Duisburg 1983 was Lange's first year out of juniors and his new double with Uwe Heppner proved unbeatable.

Lange and his partner were denied a strong chance of Olympic Gold by virtue of the Los Angeles boycott in 1984. He struck Gold in the double the following year and though sickness prevented him from challenging in 1986, he was ready to make his move into the single scull.

Sculling was dominated by two giants of world rowing: Kolbe and Karpinnen, who in 12 years had won 10 World and Olympic titles between them. Yet in 1987, Lange's time had come. He took on and beat both men in Copenhagen and repeated the feat in the Seoul Olympics to claim his first Gold medal.

Those watching were clear about the reasons why. Juergen Grobler, former top East German coach said: "You knew Thomas had a good feeling for the boat. His blades entered the water incredibly quickly, like Ivanov, the Russian, who won 3 sculling Olympic Golds in the '50s". But Lange had more too, not least a fantastic ability to visualise how a race would go and put that into effect."

But Lange also had to learn how to recover from adversity. Though he won the singles again in 1989, the death throws of East Germany had an enormous effect on him. Not only was there personal tragedy, but there was the uncertainty that such a change wrought. Moreover, Lange had to concentrate on his medical studies.

Personal challenges meant that his Silver in the doubles in 1990 was an even more remarkable achievement. Competing for the new united Germany saw him return to his best form, winning the singles again in 1991 and taking a remarkable second Olympic title in Barcelona.

He never quite managed the feat of immortality that a third successive Olympic singles title would have brought – he took the Bronze in Atlanta, though by then, he was already deep into his medical studies and took 1994 out to concentrate on them.

But in truth, Lange had already achieved a peerless status. In retirement, as in competition his contemporaries continued to be deeply impressed. Peter Hoeltzenbein, a team mate of his recalled: “I was always deeply impressed how this fantastic athlete could just leave the water and get on quietly with his medical studies and be a doctor in Ratzeburg.” He was awarded the Thomas Keller Medal in 1997.