

Yuri Pimenov

Chances are that if you knew one Russian rower between during the eighties, or early nineties, that man would be Yuri Pimenov. Certainly, it was hard not to miss his three gold medals, won in the coxless pairs, rowing behind his twin brother Nickolai. But with a career spanning from 1978 until 1993, it was his consistent excellence in all boat types that caught the eye. However, most of all those rowers from the West knew Yuri for both for his unstinting friendship and consideration for his opponents.

It was not easy for anyone rowing for the Soviet Union in the pre Glasnost days of the early eighties to be openly friendly with those from the West. But Yuri Pimenov, by dint of the English that he had learnt in Moscow was one of those who was determined to show that the camaraderie of sport extended across national frontiers.

It was usually in Yuri's room that the world's top rowers would gather after a championships to talk about the races, usually with a toast or two of Russia's finest Vodka thrown in for good measure. The fact that his fellow competitors held him in great regard was no surprise. On the water, Yuri showed great presence, whether rowing in the bow seat of a pair, coxless four, or eight with great skill. He liked to win his races from the front, with a devastating burst in the first 500m of a race.

But rowers liked Yuri's company for more than just his rowing prowess. One instance illustrates that fact. In 1987 much was made of the contest between the Pimenovs, who were World Champions in coxless pairs and the two British rowers, Andrew Holmes and Steven Redgrave. They had taken the Coxed title in 1986 and were keen to add the Pimenov's scalp to their collection. The showdown was to be at Henley Royal Regatta in the final of the Goblets.

The Pimenov's put in a devastating start to lead by over a length at the Barrier, when disaster struck for the British pair, who hit a canoe and had to stop. But with a gesture that Coubertain would have been proud of and before the Umpire following had given any instructions, Yuri told his brother to stop rowing and gestured to the British to get back level and restart.

In fact the race was re-rowed from the start with the British winning but Yuri's sportsmanship continued to be a feature throughout his long career. He and Nickolai had their revenge on Steven Redgrave when they rowed them into third place on Lake Barrington in 1990. The fact they did not add to their pair's Olympic silver in 1984 was due to the Soviet boycott of the Los Angeles games. That year in regattas, they had been unbeatable.

But Yuri looked on that result with his customary philosophical outlook. While rowing was important to him, one sensed that Yuri was always able to keep his sport in perspective. Perhaps that was why both he was such effective spokesperson for the Soviet and later Russian teams.