

Silken Laumann

Picture the scene: Summer on Essen's Baldeneysee. The water dancing around with the wakes of countless pleasure craft of all shapes and sizes. Into that mix add a 2000m regatta course and hundreds of athletes intent on tuning their final preparations for the Olympic Games in Barcelona, now just 10 weeks away. Some of them are just trying to make the team, others, like Canada's Silken Laumann, are World Champions; intent on the Olympic Gold that will perhaps fulfil their dream. Little can she have known the turn her destiny would take on that day.

Laumann was 26 when she set the rowing world alight by winning the singles Gold in Vienna in 1991. It was the way she sculled: aggressive, direct, yet precise, that was so impressive and borrowed much from the work she had done with Canada's new coach Mike Spracklen. By then she was well known amongst her fellow rowers, 1991 was already her 9th year as an international and she cut a striking figure with her blond hair, wide toothy smile and intense blue eyes.

As a mere 19 year old, she had lined up in the Los Angeles Olympics in the double sculls. It was only her second year as a Canadian international yet Laumann picked up a Bronze behind the Romanian winners. She showed her potential with a fourth place in the singles the next year. But inconsistency and nerves saw her finish out of the medals. In the Seoul Games, her fancied double could only manage a 7th place finish. Yet by 1990, Laumann was back in the single with a Silver. It meant that at 27, as she warmed up in Essen, she was favourite for the singles in Barcelona.

It was all to change in an instant: Both Laumann and the German men's pair of Von Ettingshausen and Hoelzenbein were at top speed in their warm up bursts when they collided. It was Laumann's leg that took the brunt of the collision. She needed an emergency six hour operation that day. Later, when she was back in her hospital room in Canada the doctors told her to forget the Olympics. Laumann protested but the answers were clear: her leg could not possibly heal in time.

But now Laumann's remarkable determination came into play. She recalls "No doctor is God. I told the doctors that I thought differently." She started doing upper body exercises in her hospital bed and with the help of a leg brace somehow managed to get into a boat. Those in the world of rowing could not believe that she would make the Games. But there she was in Barcelona. It was astounding and her Bronze medal in the single was almost beyond belief.

Her story and the way she sought to use it to show how others could overcome apparently impossible handicaps inspired a nation and made her one of Canada's most sought after personalities. There was more honour in 1994, when she set a World Best Time winning in Lucerne. In the Atlanta Games she was to go one better than her Barcelona Bronze, taking Silver behind Ekaterina Karsten in the singles.

Olympic Gold was to elude Laumann, though it would be easy to picture De Coubertin looking down and seeing Laumann as the embodiment of his axiom: “that the most important thing in life is not the winning but the struggle.” Perhaps there was even a ghostly smile when in 1999, at St Catherine’s; Canada Laumann received the solid gold Thomas Keller Medal to the acclaim of a grateful nation.