



TRUE SPIRIT

THE TOP ROWER'S TITANIC TURNAROUND FROM DISAPPOINTMENT TO DELIGHT. BY MARK ETHERIDGE

Kirsten McCann is a woman who transformed Olympics ghosts into World Championships gold! Favoured for a medal in the doubles with the experienced Ursula Grobler, the pair ended fifth and, after years of brutal sacrifice, were left empty-handed. Just over a year later, though, McCann made merry by becoming the first South African woman to win world champs gold when she won the lightweight single skulls title in Florida, US. 'People said there was so much external expectation on us to medal

in Rio but it was *our* expectation,' reflects McCann. 'After our semi we really believed we could medal but on the day we just didn't have our best race. We were very upset and disappointed after working so hard.' Twenty-nine-year-old McCann sets incredibly high standards; even she'll admit they are sometimes too high. 'At Rio, one of the British rowers said it was very important to bury the ghosts after a bad experience and I listened to him.' That meant many heart-to-heart chats with High Performance Centre (HPC) sports psychologist Dr Monja Human.

'I had to identify a whole lot of things to focus on ... I had so much fire inside me. I knew I could be fitter and stronger in so many areas. The funny thing was that after Rio, coach Roger [Barrow] said we'd concentrate on singles for the 2017 side. He told me, "Let's see if we can make you a world champ", and I thought that was cool as he believed in me so much. In fact, he was backing me more than I was!' The SA rowing fraternity is a close-knit unit, something McCann attests to. 'It wasn't only Roger and Dr Human but the whole team. Dr Danielle Lincoln

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helped me on so many levels. Things like how best to deal with jet-lag and how to practise clean living in nutrition. 'People look at me, the athlete, and are proud of me, but it's the support base, including the physiologists and physiotherapists, who are so much a part of it. Rand Merchant Bank is also coming on board very nicely and then, while many people are critical of Sascoc, I'm on the Opex programme and they've been right behind me.' She may be excused for taking a breather after ending top of the world, but that's just not in McCann's makeup.

'Not me. After world champs we got three weeks to chill and relax, but I have the opposite of complacency. I have to be careful not to do too much. I hate off days. I want more; I love winning and complacency is not in my nature.' Much like golf, rowing is a sport where today's perfect is tomorrow's poor. 'You never get to be perfect; it's such a technical sport that there are always finer things to work on. After our December camp [at the Katse Dam in Lesotho] we were set to have our own full-on training programme over New Year and then trials, so it never stops, which suits me.' Goals are something McCann thrives on. 'Even though I won world champs gold, I still have a huge goal - to win Olympic gold and then be world champ again. On a personal level, I always want to be the best athlete I can.' Since Rio, McCann has become more aware of the mental aspect. 'The physical side is massive. And although I love tough training, the mental challenge is very underrated. It's brutal. You need your mental strength to push you into those dark places and train your brain. 'When you get to a certain level, it's about being intelligent in the way you race. When Roger is coaching me he'll say, "Kirst, you need to work on changing this", and I'm thinking drastic changes but he says no, it's the little things, the small margins that count.' When it comes to the 2020 Olympic Games, McCann will have to put the single skulls on hold as it's not an Olympic event, but she's not fazed. 'It's another nice change going back into the double. It's the same stroke but quicker, so you have to be more precise. And what's nice is that there are some very good girls coming through and I'm going to have to be on my toes, which I love. Nicole van Wyk has medalled twice at the U23 world champs, Nikita Prinsloo is showing on the ergo that she's strong and then Megan Hancock also medalled, at the U18 world champs. Just because I have won a title and been to the Games means nothing; it's all back to square one now.'

Meanwhile, her World Championships status has done little to change her public life. 'There's a bit more media interest and the rowing community know me a bit more, but there's nothing else. That suits me, though,

BARROW ON THE CHAMP

'Kirst went through the whole mourning period after Rio,' says national coach Roger Barrow (*below*). 'She needed to grieve and was very mature about the whole thing. She took time away from rowing and came back in January 2017 and was ready to carry on. 'We made a point of doing only what we can do, irrespective of the competition. We switched from wanting to lead all the time to settling back a bit more and waiting to attack when the moment was right.' There was also a golden spin-off from McCann's world title. 'We're already picking up the benefits of her success. We've got a young training group with quite a few guys having retired, and Kirsten's gold shows there's belief in that what we're doing still works. Being a world champion, she sets standards and the guys are really feeding off her. She's great about giving feedback to the group, although on the water she gives as much as she can ... she's one tough cookie. 'In fact, she's brutally hard,' is Barrow's appraisal. 'She's as tough as the guys out there on the water and a great training partner to them all. She's a pretty girl, and obviously aware of looking her best, but don't let anyone be fooled by the blonde hair and blue eyes ...'





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as I don't like the limelight. It must be dreadful being a national rugby player and not being able to go out for dinner without being noticed.'

McCann is as busy off the water as she is on it.

'I have heaps of other interests. I absolutely love cooking, especially baking, and health and nutrition interest me. I already have a science degree, so I wouldn't mind working for one of the big food companies. I'd love to work in something like a food technology lab.'

But then there's also the question of education. 'I'm doing a post-grad degree in education. I really like working with kids and the youth and education is such a powerful tool, especially in South Africa. With ambition and education I can do anything.' ■



WHAT'S UP, DOC?

'The disappointment of Rio was immense,' says Dr Danielle Lincoln (below, left). 'In place of glory was pain and confusion. Hopes and dreams had been hacked apart and it was harrowing to feel and witness such grief and sadness. It was a brutal and humbling time.'

'Kirsten and I met on a number of occasions trying to make sense of the loss, talking it through, acknowledging factors that possibly explained the result. It was important to see it wasn't a result of just one thing, but rather a number of variables that didn't line up the way we thought.'

'Once the squad reconvened we planned ahead, using the experience of Rio. It's been an important time of developing trust. As we forge on we've deepened the learning of how to gauge the inner world of the athlete – it's been a time of healing and a perfect example of growing and moving on.'