

High Wycombe Brothers Fight For Olympic Rowing Glory

by Michael Percy

(1340 words)

Michael Percy meets two brothers who are fighting to gain a place in the GB rowing team for the 2012 Olympics at Dorney Lake. Will they let the chance of a gold medal come between them?

Next month Michael Percy will explore preparations at Dorney Lake, the home of the 2012 Olympic rowing, and meet other Olympic hopefuls from a variety of sports across Bucks and Berks.

There is always family rivalry between brothers but when that natural drive to compete is projected into a top international sport where only one of the siblings has won Olympic gold, the pressure at home could become intense.

But High Wycombe brothers Mark and Ross Hunter find there is enough stress involved in fighting for places in the Great Britain rowing squad without letting it cross the threshold of their home in Cadmore End.

The family were originally from Romford – a riverless town if ever there was one - so what attracted two Essex teenagers to a sport which has such an elitist image?

I met Beijing gold winner Mark Hunter MBE and his American girlfriend Jenny Williams at The Thames Riviera Hotel next to Maidenhead bridge – a watery setting seemed appropriate – and Mark explained how he started rowing.

“Dad was coaching at the Poplar Rowing Club on the Thames near Greenwich so I went along to see what it was about. I was always sporty and rowing appealed to me because I could see that if I put the work in I got the results. I was fourteen when I started rowing.”

Like most fathers, Terry Hunter, a rowing coach at Dorney Lake Rowing Centre, probably harboured secret dreams of Olympic glory for his boys. Unlike

most dreams this one came true in 2008 when Mark, with his rowing partner Zac Purchase, won Britain's first ever Olympic gold medal in the lightweight mens' double sculls at Beijing.

High Wycombe is an ideal base for the brothers because Mark trains with the national squad at Caversham near Reading and Ross trains with Leander Rowing Club at Henley. Also, Dorney Lake Rowing Centre will host the 2012 Olympic rowing and canoeing events.

It could be said that the life of an Olympic athlete boils down to four years of intense training and competition culminating in just a few minutes which will bring fame and glory or instant ignominy.

The brothers Hunter are working towards a sporting climax during August 2012 which will last approximately six minutes – the time it takes an elite athlete to row two thousand metres.

In Beijing in 2008 Mark Hunter and Zac Purchase had their six minutes and ten seconds of fame and a special place in GB rowing history as the first pair to bring home gold in their event.

It also led to a visit to Buckingham Palace to be awarded the MBE. "That was absolutely fantastic. I took Mum and Dad and my brother Ross to the palace. It was great being on the inside looking out instead of being a tourist staring in. I met all these amazing people including war heroes. My gold medal was nothing compared to what those guys go through."

Mark was able to take a year out which he spent coaching rowing at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA).

"It was just what I needed," said Mark. "As a team, Zac and I were unbeaten in 2008 and we were favourites to win gold at the Olympics. That causes a lot of pressure. We'd never been in a situation like that before but we dealt with it really well. The coaching support was fantastic. But when we got home we were just completely wiped out and exhausted."

It was at a party in LA that Mark met his girlfriend Jenny Williams: "We met at my friend's birthday party in the Hollywood Hills," explained Jenny. "We were talking about soccer – or football as you call it - because I had a soccer

game the next day. Mark said he loved football and I challenged him to a soccer game.

“Eventually he joined my team – a co-ed seven-a-side team where women and men play together. He was a striker and I was defence. I want to play here but womens’ soccer is not common in the UK.”

The training schedule of a professional athlete is very demanding. Typically the day starts at 7am with a 20 kilometre row followed by weight training or long sessions on rowing machines – early to bed and early to rise.

Jenny moved to Maidenhead in 2010 to be with Mark but his training regime and her London based job are not an ideal combination. “The public pressure is really hard,” explained Jenny. “There’s an outside audience watching him, he feels that a lot and does not want to let people down.”

Even as a gold medal winner Mark does not get a free ride into the team for 2012. He has to make the grade by putting together a series of wins at international events. At the first World Cup regatta in Munich at the end of May he suffered a disappointing defeat with his partner Zac Purchase when they only managed fourth place in the final.

Jenny said: “He was definitely shocked and upset after Munich. He started doing that thing where you run it over and over again thinking what could I have done, what do I need to do? He’s very strategic about it. He does think about it a lot. I don’t ask him questions – don’t bother him - if he wants to talk about it then he’ll talk. But he doesn’t want to think about rowing all the time so I’m his kind of distraction from rowing.”

Mark has tasted Olympic glory. Ross’s best performance is fourth in the 2004 World Rowing Championships. In 2009 he sank to being only fifth in the world rankings. Only? Sank? When you talk to world class athletes it is very easy to slip into their way of thinking regarding a definition of success. Fifth in the world rowing ranks is an amazing achievement. But Ross will have you believe it is akin to abject failure.

Ross is three years younger than Mark and talks about his success with an air of dissatisfaction: “We (his rowing partner is Oli Mahony) came fifth at the

world championships in 2009. Our target was to be in the A final, that's the top six. But then when you're there you want more. We wanted to push for a medal. Fifth was the lowest I've ever finished in a world championship. The time difference between gold and fifth place was only seven seconds."

This year Ross had a back injury just one week before the trials for the GB squad that will probably be the core of our 2012 Olympic team. "Training was going very well and I had hopes of doing better than ever but the back injury really cut me out and it was the time when they select the GB team."

It took Ross two months to recover his fitness and he faced a comeback race against international competition over the Olympic course at Dorney Lake in June. This was expected to prove his fitness and begin his campaign to be part of the GB team

"We had three tough races against some international quality teams and we ended up beating all the other lightweight crews in the final on Sunday. Now we are ready to go forward to Henley Regatta in July – the next big test for us."

There are only six places for lightweights in the British Olympic team but there are ten lightweight rowers in the national training squad so competition is fierce. Mark has his place in the squad but still needs to prove he is worthy of a ticket to the Olympics. Ross has to build his standing through the coming season and grab the attention of the selectors before the team is finally announced early next year.

It's all about performing at the highest level every time a blade cuts through the water. And the judge of that performance is not the guy in the next boat, or the coach or even a brother. It is much nearer home that that – the person an athlete want to beat most is the one inside them.

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