

Blast from the past – Simon Dickie

“It’s a bloody big jump going from a Maadi cup final to an Olympic heat. And so I was staggered at how calm I felt I was when we were rowing down to the start of the race. I have this very clear recollection, here I am, on the biggest stage of all, the Olympic Games and I’m going to either win or lose this bloody race because I know I’ve got a crew that’s capable of winning it. If I do everything right we will win the race, but if I stuff up we won’t win and I’ll be responsible.”

In 1968 at just seventeen years of age and with three Maadi Cup wins under his belt, Simon Dickie coxed the Men’s Coxed Four to Olympic Gold in Mexico City. Dickie won Olympic gold as part of the Coxed four in 1968, Gold in the Eight in Munich as well as a bronze medal at the eight at the 1976 Olympic Games. Here the coxswain tells his story with amazing clarity, reflecting on the events 46 years ago and revealing new details about racing at the 1968 and 1972 Olympic Games.

For Dickie it all began back at Wanganui High School in 1964 where as a slightly built student he was given the job of coxswain for his house in the inter-house school rowing competition. Peter Irvine, coach at Wanganui Collegiate handpicked Dickie as coxswain for the school rowing team which turned out to be the beginnings of an illustrious coxing career. Dickie coxed Wanganui Collegiate eights to three consecutive Maadi Cup wins in 1966, 1967 and 1968. It was coach Peter Irvine who then suggested that Dickie attend the New Zealand coxswain trials in Christchurch, “He said, “Look, Dickie you’ve got a pretty enviable record here with three Maadi cups under your belt. I think we should put your name forward.” I was in agreement, I thought this is a bloody good opportunity.”

At this stage New Zealand was building a campaign to form an eight for the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games targeting Olympic Gold, the project of selectors Fred Strachan, Don Rowlands and Rusty Robinson. After the trial Dickie was selected along with Bob Page and started off coxing the eight “It was a huge transition going from coxing school boys to coxing potential world champions. They were experienced and had campaigned previously in 1964 and 1966 so they had a pretty good idea of what their expectation was out of a cox.” While Dickie started out coxing the eight it didn’t appear to be working and Dickie himself put his hand up to say that he didn’t feel he had enough experience to develop the crew.

He was instead assigned the Coxed four of Warren Cole, Ross Collinge, Dudley Storey, and Dick Joyce. He made it clear to the crew that he was prepared to learn and said to them, “Despite having won three Maadi cups, I’m on a pretty steep learning curve here. The one thing that you guys can absolutely rely on is that I’ll always steer the boat better than anybody else, but in terms of taking control and command, I’m going to listen to your feedback. So we built a great team culture within the crew.”

Dickie quickly formed a great relationship with coach Rusty Robinson, %really befriended Rusty Robinson, I got on with him right from day dot and I think that was a big part of the ongoing success of the crews. I could get inside Rusty's mind and likewise he could get inside my mind.+

The Coxed Four arrived in Mexico City ready to take on the world amazingly having not yet raced together outside of training and having been together for just four short months. %The dynamic in the four was quite different for a start these guys were physically quite different than the uniformity of the eight. They had some issues in training but from the time that I got in that four it was a boat that went bloody quickly.+

Dickie talks with excitement about the four's natural speed which was enhanced by stepping into a brand new Italian boat, %remember we unwrapped this Donoractico boat and took it out of its case. I remember all of us thinking my god this is the most racing looking craft that any of us had ever seen. From the very first time we got in it, it was quick. It was the first time where we had been on still water where the course was marked so we could accurately measure 500 meter sprints and get an idea of what our speed was. We knew, we just knew that we had a bloody good chance of not only competing well but competing and being able to achieve what was Rusty's only goal and that was to win.+

In the days leading up to the final Dickie spent hours on the side of the lake in Mexico City with coach Rusty Robinson and Bob Page (cox of the eight) watching the competition and analyzing their stroke, %there would be the three of us there looking at eights and fours and seeing their splits and pieces over 500 meters. We were monitoring them and could pick up a lot of tell-tale things which Rusty would identify. Look at him, they've done 5 x 500m, look what's happening to his back now, that might look what he's doing with his shoulders he's dying a bit, if you see that you'd know that they're getting a bit tired.

Rusty was known for many characteristics and one of them was his focus on race strategy which he drilled into the crew, %he was a great strategist he'd say to the crew in a team meeting look this is what we think we might do but Simon will let you know. I was to look for telltale signals. Rusty and I would analyse like we were analyzing a space launch. It was all information which in my young mind I had the capacity to store and to recall.+

The four won their heat and progressed to the semi-final which they also won securing a place in the Olympic final. Dickie describes the Olympic final in great detail. %didn't have any electronics back then, just a megaphone and my voice basically. Finally away we went, we got our nose in front and we settled into work reasonably quickly and I can remember the commands that I was giving. They were sort of quite long words, long commands because I wanted them to get this big long stroke, to get everyone to follow. We actually got far enough in front that we were comfortable. We had planned to go out at 36 stroke pieces but at the 250 meter mark we actually settled and went through the 500m ahead, the boat was just singing. I remember we were

going straight down the middle of the course. I would have punished myself if I thought that we would have been half a meter either side. We went through the 1000 meter mark and we had not only open water but the best part of a boat length. I was still anxious about this oxygen debt business so we kept control virtually right through until 1750 meters until we did have some clear water. I could tell the guys were wanting to let loose so very controlled we upped the rating and the rest is history.+

Four years later, against a back drop of the alleged drug cheating from the iron curtain nations the New Zealand eight pulled off a huge coup winning the European Championships in 1972, %b was an enormous result for us in Denmark when we beat the East German Eight at the European Championships. It was a pretty bloody patchy row that we had to be honest, so we knew that we had the building blocks to pull off a huge upset in 1972.+

Dickie notes that the selectors of Rowlands, Strachan and Robinson had big plans for the eight to go on to achieve what the four had achieved in 1968, an Olympic Gold medal. %a 1972 there was a lot more focus on the mental strength and the mental approach. Rusty was a master at being able to massage that and the culmination of that was that when we picked up the boat on the day of the final in Munich, this was a crew that had peaked. It hadn't peaked the day before, it hadn't peaked at breakfast that morning, it had peaked when we picked the boat up. It was a remarkable feeling.+

Dickie remembers vividly the immense power he felt in the eight in a practice start right before the Olympic final, %We did this practice start and well l've never seen and never experienced a boat that could be propelled so quickly with so little drama, there was no splashing, there was nothing.+ Dickie says he had a realisation after the practice start and as they turned and headed back to the start blocks, %something was going to have to go wrong for us to not do what we had four years previously.+

Dickie recalls the race in vivid detail, %The buzzer went and again we bloody flew out of the blocks. I guess with the excitement, the adrenalin of an Olympic final the start was extremely highly rated and so the intention was to bring the rate back.+ Dickie recalls that Tony Hurt (in stroke seat) and Wybo Veldman (in the seven seat) were the masters at settling onto a rhythm, %those two could react to even the tone of my command, so they knew from my tone what I wanted or what we needed in the boat.+ The crew had planned to settle around 36-37 strokes per minute but found they were still at 38. Dickie made the decision to let the rate remain at the aggressive 38 strokes per minute, %the thing was just bloody flying and we knew that we had the residual training to be able to get down the course.+

He recalls there was so much going on, %There are a matrix of different processes that are going through your mind to ensure that you actually get to the end of the race before anybody else does. You're responding to what's going on around you but you're also responding to what's going on inside your own boat and it's only when you've done as much training together as

we had done as we had as a crew that you get that understanding in each other but also that absolute confidence.+

The eight had opened up to clear water and had reached the 1500 meter mark when Dickie found himself distracted and overwhelmed by the crowd, %t was then that I started to see some things and for the first time in my life I was influenced by the noise, it was incredible, the noise, in the last 500 meters of the final. I was distracted and you know you only need to be momentarily distracted and you run the risk of something going wrong. You've enveloped your whole mind body and soul into this one event in order to achieve a result but it was a roar from the outside and I had never experienced this before and I was significantly distracted for a couple of strokes.+

Dickie noticed the other crews starting to close in on them, %we were in a commanding position but we weren't necessarily in a controlling position. I started to see some of these other bloody bow balls coming up beside us and there was a moment of anxiety for a few strokes with about 400m to go where I was really anxious, really nervous and distracted from making the sort of decisions I knew we needed to make. I got a perceptive nod from Hurt in the stroke seat, I caught Veldman glancing out. They were coming at us very quickly and those were the triggers to say we really have to make our move now, that was about 300 meters out, a bloody long way to go in an Olympic final when you still haven't reached the 250 meter buoy.+

Dickie talks about the uncharacteristic support that the kiwi crew had from the crowd, %everybody in the crew was elevated by the support that New Zealand was getting with the exception of nobody. Everybody wanted New Zealand to win and that became very apparent to the crew.

All we had to do was make sure that we kept control, we couldn't afford to have anything happen, no oars breaking, no one coming off the seat.

This wasn't the capitalist versus the communist, this wasn't about the honest people beating the cheats it was more fundamental than that. It was actually all about the amateurs and the whole kind of kiwi can do thing and the amateurs beating the professionals because whether we liked it or not the other crews were professionals.+

The crew crossed the line to the roar of the Munich crowd. Dickie acknowledges that it was highly orchestrated two year campaign cleverly put together by the Strachan, Robinson and Rowlands, %We became the cogs in that bigger wheel to make their vision happen but they were certainly the ones that constructed the framework to support the dominance of New Zealand and eight oar rowing during that period.+

Dickie later went on to also earn Olympic bronze with the New Zealand eight in 1976 but admits that he was suffering from serious burnout after the putting absolutely everything into the previous two campaigns.

After retiring from coxing and exploring his options Dickie went into corporate hospitality on the advice of Don Rowlands. He was able to base his business around skills he had gained during his upbringing: fishing, hunting and shooting. He reveled in providing clients with a classic New Zealand experience and turning his intense interest in people and knowledge of the outdoors into a successful business. These days the business is still thriving and he prides himself on giving overseas visitors, %a world class experience that every New Zealander would be proud of.+

Dickie is passionate about the friendships and bonds that they formed all those years ago, within both the 1968 four and the 1972 eight. They all regularly meet up, reminisce and are truly thankful that they can still do so all these years later.