

THAT DAY IN RIO

South American Olympic Qualification

Olympic dreams exist around the globe. Olympic realities were discovered in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in November when South American nations lined up to race at the Continental Qualification Regatta for Latin America. The event was significant for the number of countries participating – 18, including first-timers Jamaica and Nicaragua.

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Additionally and significantly, of the 17 Olympic spots available (in the men's and women's single and lightweight men's and women's double), Colombia, El Salvador and Venezuela all secured positions in rowing at the Olympic Games for the first time.

Rodrigo Ideus Forero's sixth place finish in the men's single earned him a place for Colombia. But the 20-year-old has never rowed in his home country. Living in Great Britain since he was 10, Ideus always wanted to be a football player. "I played football religiously," says Ideus. But frequent injuries tempted the 14-year-old to try a new sport.

After getting a taste for the sport at his high school, Ideus went on to join the Tideway Scullers under the tutelage of Phil Rowley who had formed a group of expatriate Colombian rowers in London.

Ideus admits, "Most of the Colombian rowers are based in the United Kingdom because rowing in Colombia hasn't quite developed yet."

The Olympic dream was always there. "I knew that someday I would compete at the Olympics," says Ideus, "I just wasn't expecting it to be quite so soon."

"I only just made the top six (at Rio) and the Olympics by half a second. In that last sprint to the line so many thoughts went through my head and I found that my massive desire to make it to Beijing was what carried me across the line ahead. That day in Rio I was the happiest man alive."

Ideus is currently studying economics and has reduced his course load by half to give himself more training time. "My coach [former

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Rodrigo Ideus Forero (COL)

Olympian Tim Male], has laid out a very rigorous plan for the year, including plans to bring my performance weight up," says Ideus who previously competed as a lightweight.

The Colombian allows himself time to imagine Beijing. "It will be incredible lining up with the world's best single scullers while the whole world watches. Not many people can say they have raced at the Olympics."

El Salvador's Camila Vargas Palomo, like Ideus, is making it a first for her country. Similar to Ideus, Vargas is not living in the country that she will compete for.

Vargas discovered rowing during her summer vacation in 2001. Three years ago she began rowing year-round and in 2005 Vargas competed for the first time internationally, at the World Rowing Championships. In the lead up to Beijing, Vargas has moved to Seville, Spain. Rowing is now full time for her.

El Salvador has two rowing clubs and rowing history goes back just 15 years. "All of the rowers know each other," says Vargas who is coached by Osvaldo Borchi.

Coming from a sporting family, Vargas began with swimming and basketball. She was inspired into competitive rowing by the desire to be the best. Competing at the Olympic Games was never a consideration. Crossing the finish line in Rio in qualifying position, Vargas says she was mad.

"It wasn't the race that I had planned for that day. But when I realised that I was going to the Olympics a big smile, ear to ear, became the new tattoo on my face."

Vargas will continue training in Seville with the Spanish rowing team until Beijing and she plans to compete in as many races as possible to increase her experience.

FISA's Competitive Commission member, Curtis Jordan, was in Rio for the regatta and commented: "To see the excitement of these athletes and coaches at winning a place in the Olympics made the trip for me. Pure unadulterated joy! Truly the Olympic spirit; no cautious or jaded emotions." ■ *M.S.B.*

BEIJING OLYMPIC QUALIFIERS FROM LATIN AMERICA

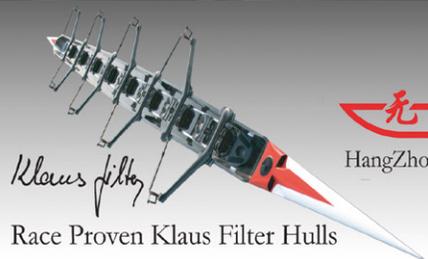
W1x (1st to 5th place): CHI, BRA, CUB, ARG, ESA

M1x (1st to 6th place): BRA, MEX, CHI, VEN, URU, COL

LW2x (1st to 3rd place): CUB, MEX, BRA

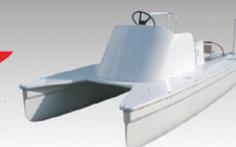
LM2x (1st to 3rd place): CUB, BRA, URU

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