

Capturing the Mexican spirit

Mexico City has a population of 21 million people. Before the 2008 Olympic Games a huge billboard was erected on one of the busiest highways featuring Patrick Loliger Salas. A lot of people saw it. Loliger is Mexico's best single sculler and has been for the last 10 years.

"I was standing there in a World Cup tee-shirt," says Loliger. "It said, 'Our student from International Business is going to the Olympics. We are proud.' It was weird for me to see myself every day on the poster."

Football reigns supreme in Mexico so for a rower to get this kind of exposure is unusual. But Loliger sees it as part of the growth of rowing in his country. Says Loliger: "People confuse rowing with canoeing all of the time, but rowing is growing in Mexico. I think this is because of the 2007 Pan American Games when Analicia [Ramirez] won silver in the lightweight double. Then when I got to the Beijing Olympics it helped a lot because I was on TV and in magazines."

Loliger is part of a small but growing number of Mexicans who have been exposed to rowing and chosen it as their sport.

Like the majority of Mexican boys, Loliger's sporting life began with football. His football club, Club Espana, Loliger says proudly, is one of the best football clubs in Mexico. It is also one of the best rowing clubs. In Mexico it is not uncommon for football clubs to be united with full sporting facilities including other sports. This makes rowing visible to the large number of club members.

"Quite a few try rowing," says Loliger, "but most of them quit because it's too hard physically. In football you only train three times a week. For rowing I have trained daily since I was 13 years old." Loliger says he was small as a kid. He saw pictures of rowers and wanted to look like them. "I really admire Derek Porter and Rob Waddell."

At his first junior national championships Loliger won the single, double and quadruple sculls. "So I thought that I could be good at rowing," he says modestly. By the age of 18 rowing was his sole sport. >

Mexico's men's single sculler Patrick Loliger Salas at the 2011 Samsung World Rowing Cup in Hamburg, Germany.



© 2011 Martin Rose/Bongarts/Getty Images



> Lightweight double sculls representative Analicia Ramirez wears her hair pulled back and has a manner of serious conviction. She went hunting for a sport and found rowing. "I was a very active girl and loved all sports," says Ramirez. "I tried gymnastics, tennis, taekwondo and swimming and none were right for me. I finally found rowing and soon I made good results. I then coxed because the coach wanted me to, but I didn't like it."

Ramirez then had a breakthrough. "In 2004 I won the junior double at the Canadian Henley, then in 2005 at the US national champs I was third in the senior 'b' double and first in the senior 'b' pair."

These results got Ramirez fired up to row more. She had found her sport. Ramirez has now notched up five years on the Mexican team, a win this year at Italy's Paolo D'Aloja Regatta, and last year at the Central American and Caribbean Games,

Ramirez got the highest number of medals of all the participants – gold in the women's single, women's quad and lightweight women's double. Currently Ramirez is rowing in the lightweight double with her partner of three years, Gabriela Huerta Trillo.

Both Ramirez and Loliger live in Mexico City which has the majority of the nation's rowers and Loliger estimates that there are about 2,000 >

Gabriela Huerta Trillo (b) and Analicia Ramirez (s) from Mexico prepare to race in the lightweight women's double sculls repechage at the 2011 Samsung World Rowing Cup in Hamburg (GER).

> in the region, ranging from juniors through to masters rowers. There are nine rowing clubs in Mexico City with a small number of clubs in the rest of the country. The majority of rowers are juniors as they get funding help. But then, Loliger says, many quit at 18 to go to university or to work. There are about 30 elite rowers in total (at all levels).

Living in Mexico City and rowing is challenging. To get to the rowing course for training, Loliger travels just a short distance out of the city but because of the level of traffic it takes one to two hours to get there. "We can't walk or bike as it's dangerous," says Loliger. "Two years ago I got hit by a car while biking to training. I broke my collar bone."

The air pollution in Mexico City is also an issue, a consequence of both the pollution and training at the mile high 1968 Olympic rowing course, Pista Olimpica de Remo Virgilio Uribe. "We breathe better when we go somewhere else," says Loliger. Ramirez and Loliger, along with other Mexico City rowers also have Xochimilco to train at – a World Heritage area with about 170km of canals.

Virgilio Uribe is the venue for Mexico's biggest regatta. Organised by Club Espana, the Regatta del Club Espana is in its 25th year and attracts teams from throughout Latin America and sometimes Canada and Spain. There are four other regattas that Loliger says are at a good level in Mexico.

The next 12 months will be an eventful time for Ramirez and Loliger and critical in their rowing career. They aim to qualify for the 2012 London Olympic Games at this year's World Rowing Championships, then it will be back to South America for the Pan American Games, held in Mexico in October. The Pan American Games are extremely important as it will influence their

funding and also is an opportunity to promote rowing locally, especially if they are successful.

The best result ever achieved by Mexico at rowing is a seventh place finish by Joaquin Gomez at the 1992 Olympic Games. Can Loliger or Ramirez achieve the new standard?

Mexico's Huerta and Ramirez at the 2011 Samsung World Rowing Cup in Hamburg, Germany.

● M.S.B.



© 2011 Martin Rose/Bongarts/Getty Images