

Thomas Keller Medal James Tomkins

By Martin Cross

Australia's legendary rower James Tomkins will be presented with the Thomas Keller Medal by Denis Oswald, current FISA President, on Sunday 7 November at 14h10 on the medal ceremony pontoon.



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James Tomkins giving an interview during the 2007 World Rowing Championships in Munich, Germany.

James Tomkins sat alert, his long, lanky muscles loose and relaxed, his eyes fixed on the umpire standing in the start tower of Hazewinkel's regatta course, site of the 1985 World Rowing Championships. Behind the 19-year-old sat seven Australians, all ready to respond at the slightest movement of Tomkins' oar. The flag dropped and Tomkins leant – almost nonchalantly – on his oar. The first stroke in a sensational international career was underway.

In truth, then, he seemed just another young Aussie hopeful – his crew eventually finished ninth. Even he – and self-belief has never been a quality that was in short supply chez Tomkins – could not have guessed how much his future performances would impact his chosen sport. The very next year Tomkins' eight won World Championship gold.

But wind forward 23 years from Hazewinkel. Tomkins would have six Olympic Games under his belt. Rowing had changed so much, yet Tomkins was somehow still there, doing what he loved, racing and hanging out with the guys. And by then, he'd pulled millions of strokes – some of the most impossibly long, fluid and dynamic strokes you could imagine. And all that without really seeming to try that hard. It was that style which created the ripples, which would have a profound impact.

"Jimmy made nonchalance an art form and that could really get to some people," said

his former teammate Paul Reedy, now a leading international coach. Reedy went on to explain: "He operated on a different plane to everyone else, with an intuitive understanding of how to move a boat."

Unsurprisingly, that understanding gave him and his Melbourne-based internationals the confidence (and perhaps arrogance), to create Australia's unforgettable 'Oarsome Foursome'. The title was coined by a Melbourne journalist and reflected that four's dominance of the event. They won back to back Olympic golds, in Barcelona and Atlanta, along with world titles in 1990 and 1991.

Any Australian will be able to sing the song that went with the Oarsome Foursome's ad for Goulburn Valley canned fruit on television in those days. In 2004, the foursome released a general fitness DVD entitled Oarsome Foursome Fitness. They had made rowing popular in Australia.

Tomkins' fluidity had even more impact in a pair. His combination with Drew Ginn had an effortless speed. And in the 1999 World Rowing Championships, the two men crafted an unforgettable race – perhaps it was Tomkins' best. The margin of their victory left the world breathless, set new standards and made Tomkins the only man ever to win World Championship gold medals in every sweep oar event.

Tomkins only raced Redgrave once, at the Henley Royal Regatta in 1998. Then, Tomkins' four, on yet another comeback trail, came in behind Britain's top crew. But you could see how much winning against Tomkins meant to the British crew with Matthew Pinsent who, for the only time in his career, famously took his hand off his blade and shook it in triumph. But Tim Foster, who rowed behind Pinsent, tellingly said: "Jimmy's crew weren't in top shape then. But they were the only four who raced us with the belief they could win. I remember the massive push they put in at half-way. I thought 'if they carry this on, there's nothing I can do.'"

Foster, now Swiss national coach, still uses the film of Tomkins' legendary race in 1999 as an example to his young athletes. And despite their rivalry, Foster explained: "It was horrible to find out that he was actually a really nice guy, somebody who was thoughtful about his sport and a real model in terms of how he carved out time out of the sport to spend with his family."

Noel Donaldson, who coached Tomkins from schoolboy to Olympic Champion and probably knows him as well as anyone, agrees with Foster: "Jimmy was the best in the world at maintaining his form in the heat of battle even when he was taking breaks from the sport." >>

James Tomkins (s) and Drew Ginn celebrate winning the men's pair at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece.



Tomkins was a master at using cross-training in different sports to keep himself in top shape. He loved surfing, has played Aussie Rules Football for the top-flight Melbourne side and enjoys golf and cycling. For all of this Tomkins acknowledges the support from his wife and three young girls.

'The Don', as Tomkins called him, knew that his protégé was sometimes no angel: "He was only interested in winning and would often ease up before the line. He had the sort of big ego that you sometimes find in a lot of top sportsmen. When I coached him at school, he got quite full of himself and I had to kick him out of the boat club for a while." But Donaldson added: "The ego thing was one of the reasons that he and the guys in the four were so successful. Both he and Mike McKay were so competitive about everything. But Jimmy deserved all the accolades."

In 2000, Tomkins showed both his confidence and competitive nature when Ginn's back injury put him out of contention for Lucerne and then the Olympics. At short notice on the Rotsee, Tomkins chose to "jump in" a pair with the team's spare man and fellow Victorian, Matthew Long. With hardly any practice, the two men won brilliantly in Lucerne and took Olympic bronze in Sydney.

Ginn's recovery set up the gladiatorial struggle between the Australian and British pair of Pinsent and Cracknell. The duel between these two crews electrified the sport. At their first meeting in a heat on the Rotsee in 2002, Tomkins' fluid, nonchalant length destroyed Pinsent and Cracknell's power-based stroke. But the Aussies were caught napping off the start

later at the World Championships in Seville and were beaten in a new World Best Time by Great Britain.

But it was different at the 2003 World Rowing Championships in Milan. And revenge was sweet for Tomkins and Ginn, who gained a crucial and telling psychological advantage over their rivals. The Aussies won comfortably. The British – who finished back in 4th place – subsequently chose to move out of the pair and into a four for their Athens campaign. From there, Tomkins went on to take his third Olympic gold medal in 2004.

Four years later, Tomkins achieved the kind of sporting Valhalla that he loved, when the 42-year-old was chosen to be his country's flag bearer in Beijing's opening ceremony. By then, the 42-year-old was a sporting legend and an inspiration to countless Australians, both young and old.

So 23 years on there was a beautiful symmetry between his first and last international strokes. When Tomkins' eight crossed the bubbles of the Beijing finish line – in a disappointing sixth place – he was rowing in a crew which contained rowers some of whom weren't even born when Tomkins first raced, back in 1985. Yet in both boats Tomkins was the acknowledged leader of a young Aussie crew. Unsurprisingly, he found it hard to hang up his oars, and even flirted with a London 2012 comeback. The award of the 2010 Thomas Keller medal is a fitting tribute to one of rowing's iconic figures. ■



What is the Thomas Keller Medal?

The Thomas Keller Medal is the highest distinction in the sport of rowing. It is awarded to recognise an exceptional international rowing career as well as exemplary sportsmanship and legendary aspect.

Thomas Keller (Thomi) born 1924, was elected President of FISA in 1958, at the age of 34 and was then the youngest president of an international sports federation ever. At that time he was still an active athlete himself, and he made it his principle always to give priority to the competitors' interests, an axiom which has been a guiding principle for his beloved sport ever since.

Following the 1988 Olympics, Thomi Keller spontaneously awarded the FISA Medal of Honour to Peter-Michael Kolbe and Pertti Karpinnen to commemorate one of the greatest rivalries in the history of the sport and recognising their exceptional talent and sportsmanship. This shaped the idea of the Thomas Keller Medal which was initiated by the Keller family following Thomi's passing in 1989 and first awarded to the great Norwegian oarsman Alf Hansen in 1990.

Each year, the winner is carefully selected by the Thomas Keller Medal committee, after a broad international nomination process, to ensure that the true values which Thomi so strongly believed in are represented in this award.