

# Thomas Keller Medal Elisabetha Lipa

By Martin Cross

**Romania's legendary female rower, Elisabetha Lipa, will be presented with the Thomas Keller Medal on Sunday 1 June 2008 at 13:00 on the medal ceremony pontoon in the presence of Dominik Keller, son of the late President of FISA, and Denis Oswald, current FISA President.**

It's easy to look at Elisabetha Lipa's amazing career in terms of numbers of medals won and statistics: five Olympic gold medals; a career that lasted over twenty years; peerless in both sculling and rowing – one could go on... But behind the numbers lies a remarkable human story; a woman whose indomitable spirit inspired countless young rowers in her native Romania. Not least because through her motherhood, three retirements and a career in the Police, she showed how much one woman could achieve.

To the English speaking media – even within the world of rowing – the personality of such a remarkable person – she won her first Olympic Gold in 1984 at the age of just 19 in the double sculls – has remained largely hidden. Romania's position in the Eastern Block before 1989, did not make for an easy exchange of information. And Lipa herself is not a fluent English speaker.

One of Lipa's competitors and fellow Thomas Keller medal winner, Marnie McBean, remembers: "At first like everyone, I was somewhat intimidated by her gruff stare. But I learned a bit of Romanian which allowed me to crack through that wall and managed to get her to smile at me." McBean shrewdly added: "I sat with her at the Athens Olympic Games and she's a real fan of the sport. But because she was a bit hesitant in English, people disregarded her a bit and weren't able to connect her to her victories under her maiden name of Oleniuc."

Undoubtedly, Lipa used the same psychological ploy as Steven Redgrave: establishing a psychological to match her physical supremacy over her opponents before the race. Indeed, with her amazing success on the water, it would be hard not to be over-awed. But McBean pointed out: "She was a very smart racer too and very purposeful in the way she raced."

But if recognition has eluded her in the west, even within Romania, it was not until 2004 that she was really recognized. She recounted how after winning the eight in Athens, hence becoming the most decorated rower in the

history of the Olympics, people approached her in the street and said: "I cried during your race". But Lipa went on to explain: "Everyone cried this year. But I have five other Olympics behind me and no one had ever cried before."

To a real extent, the Thomas Keller medal award is a long-overdue recognition of both Lipa's and her native Romania's success in women's rowing over the last quarter of a century. Lipa's immense achievements transcend her sport and are recognized by rowers past and present.

While Britain's Katherine Grainger has never raced Lipa, the triple world champion had no hesitation in calling the Romanian: 'A living legend'. And those were sentiments echoed by McBean, who went head to head with Lipa, in the early '90s. The Canadian had no hesitation in pointing out what special qualities Lipa must have had: "The Romanian programme was always really strong with so many athletes that had repeat success, so for her to stay on top for so long – that was something else."

One of the biggest battles that Lipa had to fight against her fellow Romanians was the right to be in the single. And it was in that event that she won the most memorable of her Olympic Gold medals: the single sculls in Barcelona in 1992. There, she headed Belgium's Annalise Bredal and Canada's Silken Laumann by just over a second in a memorable race.

Lipa's singles duels with Laumann in 1991 and earlier with the German Democratic Republic's Birgit Peter, were one of the highlights of the sport. And Lipa has no doubt that it was racing the single that gave her the most pleasure: "It was the hardest but the most fulfilling. There is no one to talk to. You're all alone, there is no one to help you." She went on to explain how a single draws on inner reserves: "Inside the crew, when you have a moment of weakness one of the team mates helps you out. But in the single, if you're down, you are out of the race for good."

But Lipa has also won her Thomas Keller medal for her impact on her teammates too. And with three Olympic Golds in the eight, that's

hardly surprising. Lipa herself acknowledged that in 2004, at the age of 40, rowing with women much younger than her might have been an issue. But she said: "I never said "I'm Elisabetha Lipa and I rule here. Some of them addressed me as "Ma'm Lipa". If we are boat mates we cannot address one another that way. I believe I earned their sympathy and trust by my way of being. They are my best friends."

Lipa's Olympic highlights span her first and last Games: the contrast of Los Angeles to her native Romania in 1984 and the excitement of Athens, where she carried the Flag for Romania in the opening ceremony. And, at a time when memories of the late Thomi Keller may be fading, it is appropriate to record that in 1989, the last year of his life, he saw Lipa win her first world singles title in Bled. Even Thomi would not have believed that woman could have remained at the top for another fifteen years.



## 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.

