

He's Got Both Oars in the Water

WORLD-CLASS ROWER DEREK PORTER GRADUATES FROM CMCC

Editorial Staff

Take a quick glance at Derek Porter, and you'd be hard-pressed to find anything special about him. Of course, he's taller than the average male, and he's athletically built, but there's nothing underneath that calm exterior that hints at what he's accomplished on the field of athletics. He's the Canadian version of basketball player John Stockton -- an Olympic gold medalist that could walk down the streets of most major cities and blend in without most people thinking twice about it.

Few stories are more inspiring than that of Porter, who has managed to juggle his chiropractic studies with the physical demands required of a world-class athlete and still succeed in both areas. Although Derek graduated from Toronto's Canadian Memorial Medical College in May, the tale of how he came to be a doctor of chiropractic world-class athlete actually begins more than 2,000 miles away in the Canadian province of British Columbia.

Rowing Was "Just Another Sport"

Born in Belfast, Derek and his family moved to Victoria, British Columbia when he was two. In 1986, while a student at the University of Victoria, Derek decided to take up rowing, an activity he considered "just another sport" at the time. Soon, he was a member of the school's varsity rowing team; within two years, he was rowing for the Canadian national team as a member of the men's heavyweight eights (an eight-man sweep rowing team).

It was his association with the Canadian national team that sparked Derek's interest in chiropractic. At the time, the team's assistant coach recommended that rowers visit his personal chiropractor, Dr. Michael Murray. Derek was one of the first rowers on the team to receive a chiropractic adjustment, and it was through Dr. Murray's care that Derek developed an interest in pursuing a career in chiropractic for himself.

"It's the far-reaching effects that chiropractic has on the body that excites me," Derek explained. "If your body is not getting the right neural input, it's not going to function at 100 percent, and that's what high-performance athletics is all about."

In 1992, Derek was part of the eight-man crew that won the gold medal for Canada at the Summer Olympics in Barcelona. The following year, Derek made headlines when he won a gold medal in the men's single sculls event at the world championships in the Czech Republic. In doing so, Derek became the only man ever to win gold medals in both men's heavyweight eights and single sculls.

The feat was all the more remarkable because the two events require entirely different rowing techniques. "The win was a surprise to everyone," Derek said, "including me."

Unlike most athletes who look for a financial windfall, Derek knew that he wasn't going to make a living from the sport. He also knew that his career could not go on forever, so two days after winning the world title, Derek began studying to become a DC at Canadian Memorial Chiropractic College.

Porter underwent a grueling schedule for his first two years as a chiropractic student. Often times, it meant spending eight or more hours at class, returning home for another five hours of rowing or working out, and using the rest of his time studying until two or three in the morning. Then, he would have to get up early in the morning and do it all over again the next day.

While Derek began focusing his attention on his chiropractic studies at CMCC, however, the daily grind of school and working out began to take a toll on his performance in the water. Although he won a gold medal in the Commonwealth Games in 1994, he slipped to an eighth-place finish in the 1994 world championships later that season and finished seventh in the world championships the following year.

It was a disheartening time for Derek, considering that he'd been ranked as the top rower in the world only a short time ago. Some people would have just given up and moved on to another part of their life, but not Derek. He was determined to prove that his victory in 1993 was no fluke, so he took a year off from his chiropractic studies to focus solely on rowing and preparing for the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta.

Going for the Gold

Within a few months, Derek had regained the conditioning and form that had made him an Olympic champion. In May, 1996, Derek showed the rowing world that he was back, winning the gold medal in men's single sculls at the Rotsee regatta in Lucerne, Switzerland.

Two months later, Derek was back in the Olympics, where he swept through the qualifying and semifinal heats with relative ease. In the finals, he encountered his biggest challenge yet in Switzerland's Xeno Mueller. Although Derek rowed valiantly and led for three-quarters of the race, he ended up just missing out on the gold medal, losing to Mueller by less than three seconds.

"I gave it everything I could and it was a good race," Porter said. "On this day, I couldn't have beaten Xeno so on that basis I'm happy to have the silver medal." Despite the loss to Mueller in the finals, Derek's second-place finish was the best ever by a Canadian in the men's single sculls event.

With the Olympics over, Derek returned to CMCC in the fall of 1996 and resumed his chiropractic education. Less than two years later, on May 1, 1998, Derek and dozens of other students gathered at the University of Toronto's Convocation Hall to receive their doctor of chiropractic diplomas.

With his studies at CMCC over for the time being, Porter will be able to offer his patients a keen insight on chiropractic -- both as doctor and patient. As an Olympic champion, he's seen the results chiropractic can have on the body's performance. "When races are won in the hundredths of a second, it's the small cogs in the machine that make the difference," Derek said, "and chiropractic care can help make those cogs work to their best potential."

By the same token as a chiropractor, Derek feels that his performance as an elite athlete will be a great boon to him treating patients. "I've been there," Derek said. "I've pushed my body to its limits and I understand the workings of the body from the patient's perspective."

The Best Is Yet to Come

Now that Derek has a doctor of chiropractic degree under his belt, does this mean that his rowing days are behind him? By all means, no. Porter's already making plans for the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia. At age 30, he's still got a lot of competitive years left in him. "I've just started to reach my maximum potential."

Brian Richardson, Canada's head coach and Porter's personal coach, agrees. "He's at the right age where ... he could be right in there in whatever event he chose to go in for. I think he could do fantastically well in 2000. He's a great athlete. I'd love it if he's going to go on."

While Derek already has plans for going on and competing at the Olympics in Sydney, he's still one of those rare athletes who realizes that his career isn't going to last forever. That's one of the reasons he chose a career in chiropractic while he was still in training, and it's that philosophy that keeps him trying to achieve everything he can while there's time to do it.

"It is a pretty short life," said Derek. "I think to use it as productively as possible is important. I'm sure there is a higher purpose to civilization on this planet. I think a lot if it is to find out what that is and to further contribute to it or be the best you can be in life."

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