

by Glynn A. Leyshon

The competition at the Games is so intense and so close are the athletes in ability that often the only thing that separates the medallists from the rest is a scintilla of luck – good fortune for the winner or bad luck for the loser. Sometimes it is a stumble, a minor error in judgment, or a trick of nature but nothing compares to equipment failure in terms of bad luck. Such was the case of the Canadian heavy eight crew in the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki.

The crew from the *Argonaut Rowing Club of Toronto*, captained by Harry "Bo" WESTLAKE, was a sleeping giant of potential that had worked together for two years. Coached by Harry KAYSMITH, the big men, the biggest crew in Canada, (average weight was 185 lbs.) had rounded into contention for an Olympic berth by dint of massive amounts of hard work and extreme dedication. Captain Westlake was typical. He arose each day at 5:00 A.M. to assemble a brown bag breakfast, was on the water at 6:00 for an hour workout then by streetcar (where he ate his food) to his full time job at *Imperial Oil*. After a full day's work, he was back in the boat by 6:00P.M. for a second practice with the emphasis on technique of starts, sprints and course runs. When he went to bed at 10:30 it was a welcome spot. Not only did the crew do their stuff in good weather but elongated the season in every way for opportunity to hone their skills. Toronto harbor has a break wall which in spring and fall freezes over before does the lake proper. Kaysmith and his crew would break through the ice to get to the open water even in late fall and early spring, thus gaining more time on the water to fuse as a crew.

On the day of the trials, WESTLAKE took his number three seat as prepared as he could be to vie over the Canadian Henley course with the odds-on favorite, the crew from British Columbia. This west coast crew had a formidable record; they had defeated the top US craft from California, Oregon and Washington. "Bo" knew, however, the Argos were fit, "pumped" and ready. Despite being a big crew they didn't rely on pure muscle power, but had developed a nice touch of finesse and could make their shell lift and sing through the water in awesome fashion.

It was apparent from the start of their qualifying race that this was to be a two-boat affair. The west coast craft and the Argos quickly pulled in front and by the half-way point the Argonauts were a sizzling boat length ahead and still moving out. They shot over the finish line a mere 5 seconds off the world record for the distance,

two clear boat lengths ahead of what many considered the best heavy eight in the country. It was a stunning victory.

All was not right with the fates, however. Captain Bo WESTLAKE faced an obstacle, some bad luck, that could not be ignored and which threatened the entire crew. It concerned his pregnant wife and his job. Bo had already used his vacation time to attend the trials at Henley. He now needed six more weeks in order to travel to the Olympics, compete and return. The company would allow him the time off but without pay. It was a dilemma. Should he abandon his wife or the crew? If he left his wife without money she would suffer; if he left the crew after two years of dedicated involvement, the crew would suffer. He explained things to coach Kaysmith as calmly as possible.

Within a short time while he continued to practice twice a day, word came that management would like to see WESTLAKE. The decision to grant an unpaid leave had been reconsidered and he would now be allowed to go with pay. This small turn of good luck was not without its own setback. Would a paid leave affect WESTLAKE'S amateur status?

After a week of idleness crossing the ocean on a liner, Bo and his teammates were full of pent up energy. Their precious shell was to arrive by freighter a day or two after the team landed in Helsinki. Naturally, a fine-tuned team like this was anxious to rehone their skills and timing after the layoff. Disaster waited.

The freighter had run into a storm on the North Sea and part of the cargo of automobiles in the hold had broken loose and careened around in the area they shared with the shells. It was no contest. The shells were reduced to matchsticks. The crew's confrontation with luck was all bad.

Coach KAYSMITH used every connection and resource he could muster to try to make the best of a very bad situation. He thought he lucked into something when he found the US team had two shells but were using only one. No solution. The Americans refused to lend the spare shell and it was tantalizing to see the craft sitting on a rack day after day.

Then KAYSMITH found the Swedes would lend a boat. Good luck? No. The boat was rigged for a port stroke while the Canadians rowed with a starboard stroke. Nevertheless, they got on the water at last, awkward as it was. Then another stroke of luck, Kaysmith found a used shell for sale in Sweden and bought it. This craft,

unfortunately, also was rigged for port stroke so the coach had it dismantled and rerigged. They were in business at last. Or were they? The boat proved too small for the large Argo crew so plywood strips were added to the sides to reduce the amount of water taken aboard. Then it was discovered that the foot pieces in the jerry-rigged boat required them to wear shoes. In the awkward, clumsy, ungainly shell with mismatched oars and plywood topsides the prize crew were at last on the water but things were far from the fine-tuning sessions they had expected at this stage.

With but four days training in their hybrid boat, the Canadians entered the first heat of the rowing competition. Lady luck deserted them once again. The crew flailed down the course and finished fourth. The repechage would be their last chance.

Next day the Argonaut assembled their motley collection of equipment to do battle with the Swedes for a chance to advance. Would they have any luck? They fell behind early and all seemed lost but digging in to their deepest reserves the Canadians caught the Norsemen

crew in the last ten strokes. It was a tight finish. So tight, in fact, that both crews sat on the water for half an hour while the officials debated. Finally a decision was reached and with it a glimmer of luck. Both teams would advance. It was the first dead heat in the history of Olympic rowing.

The jubilant Canadians looked for another break in their luck in the semifinal. Another miracle, another smile from the Gods! The following day in their wallowing tub of a shell, they were nosed out by the West German crew for the last spot in the final. Lady luck had only been teasing them.

To get together a group of eight men of solid athleticism and dedication with a common goal is rare enough but to do it twice even rarer. The Argonaut crew disbanded their chance at fame and glory rudely smashed in the hold of a freighter. There are only so many opportunities to win an Olympic medal and when luck is against you, well...

