

South American rowing

by Melissa Bray

From the exclusive private sports clubs of Argentina, to the state-run system in Cuba, South American rowing has developed via an assortment of paths as varied as the people themselves.

Ever since European immigrants brought the sport to the continent a small but keen following has kept rowing alive and kicking, making the most of bodies of water ranging from lakes to rivers to the sea.

FISA International Umpire Santiago Fuentes describes rowing, especially in Mexico, as originally part of high society: "People used to belong to the clubs much more for the social status than for the sport itself," says Fuentes. "No doubt these were clubs for the social elite."

Some of these early clubs still remain with names like the Flamengo in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the Club Nautico de la Habana in Cuba, and in Peru the Club de Regatas Lima. Many are sporting clubs that include everything from tennis to soccer to swimming pools.

Today, Argentina can arguably make the claim to have the largest population of rowers. In the region of Tigre, where almost all of the rowers from this nation come from, the history of rowing is lengthy. The Tigre region has achieved the best results over the last 100 years producing most of the top rowers to go on to the international stage.



Argentinian rower Sergio Fernandez racing at the 2004 BearingPoint Rowing World Cup in Lucerne, Switzerland. / Le rameur argentin Sergio Fernandez à la Coupe du monde d'aviron BearingPoint 2004 à Lucerne, en Suisse.

One of these rowers, the late Alberto Demiddi, is considered almost unanimously as the greatest rower in South American history. The Argentinean single sculler was the only South American to medal in rowing at the Olympics (bronze in 1968 and silver in 1972) and to win the World Rowing Championships (in 1970).

The second greatest South American rower followed closely on Demiddi's heels. Ricardo Ibarra, also from Argentina, made the Finals at both the 1976 and 1984 Olympic Games. Ibarra has since made his mark as one of the top coaches in the region and he continues to work as FISA Development Director for South America spreading his coaching knowledge throughout the continent.



Chileans Medina, Post, Atero and Silva win bronze in the LM4+ at the 2004 BearingPoint Rowing World Cup in Munich, Germany. / Les chiliens Medina, Post, Atero et Silva remportent le bronze en LM4+ à la Coupe du monde d'aviron BearingPoint 2004 à Munich, en Allemagne.

The success of Argentina's single scullers has continued through to today with the highest ranked South American rower at present being two-time Olympian Santiago Fernandez. Fernandez raced in the final at Athens finishing fourth in the single giving him the status of the highest placing South American rower at the 2004 Olympic Games.

Argentina has also produced South America's top woman rower. Maria Julia Garisoain competed at both the Atlanta and Sydney Olympics in the double but found her greatest success as a lightweight single sculler at the World Rowing Championships winning bronze in 1998 and 1999.

More recently Chile has made its mark on the international scene. Christian Yantani Garces and Miguel Cerda Silva achieved a first in 2002 by setting the world best time in the lightweight men's pair while winning gold at the Seville World Rowing Championships. This record still holds today.

The South American rowing championships is the main event for the continent with the four yearly Pan American Games being the international highlight for the region and the number of countries participating has been steadily rising. Last year at Athens eight South American countries competed, an increase of three over the 2000 Olympic participation with the addition of Uruguay, Paraguay and Peru.

South America will continue to face many challenges in the development of rowing. In a continent where soccer reigns supreme, interest in rowing remains on the fringe.

According to Chilean rowing enthusiast Juan Pablo Berlinger, the expense of the sport plays a major factor in hindering growth. "It is very difficult, because the equipment is expensive and it has to be

imported," says Berlinger who believes that this has limited rowing's accessibility.

Berlinger also notes that there is a growing problem of water pollution affecting many of the lakes and rivers of the continent. This has been highlighted by Sao Paulo's main rowing lake which recently became so contaminated that rowing activity had to stop completely.

But Fuentes remains positive in the knowledge that the rowing potential is substantial as he looks to the advantages: "Lakes and rivers are sometimes in the middle of cities," says Fuentes who also notes the climatic advantages. "There is no snow to worry about."

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