

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ

Britain Takes Aim at a U.S. Rowing Dynasty

The American women's eight has gone a decade without losing a race, but rivals hope to end that streak of dominance in Rio



The U.S. women's eight team trains in Rio before the start of the 2016 Olympic Games. PHOTO: CARLOS BARRIA/REUTERS

By **SIMON ZEKARIA**

2 COMMENTS

Aug. 7, 2016 2:54 p.m. ET

Competing four years ago on waters just a few miles from Queen Elizabeth II's Windsor Castle retreat, British women won their first-ever gold in Olympic rowing—then proceeded to win two more.

Of six Olympic women rowing events at London 2012, Britain finished first in three. That was by far their best performance since women rowers began competing in the Olympics in 1976.

Yet even amid the success of those Games, a sense of regret lingered at Dorney Lake. In rowing, the marquee event is the women's eight, and in 2012 the British team finished fifth in that race, four spots behind an American squad that had not lost an international women's eight race since 2006.

Now, still stinging from that disappointment, and inspired by their victories in other rowing races at the London Games, the British women have arrived at Rio's Olympics determined to end the now-decade-long dominance of the American women's eight team.

"No one is invincible," said British rower Heather Stanning, also a British army captain, who started the 2012 gold medal rush in a paired boat.

To be sure, Britain isn't alone in this quest. New Zealand, the Netherlands and Canada are also vying to topple the U.S.

When it comes to rowing, however, there exists between Great Britain and America a special rivalry. Since the start of the modern Olympics, Great Britain has won 63 all-time medals, second only to America's 87. Britain's 28 gold medals stand four short of the U.S.

But Britain has still never won the women's eight. If ever conditions favored its triumph, it would have been on its own course four years ago, where 400,000 adoring fans stood on the banks of Dorney Lake—then known as the Eton Dorney venue—cheering on the British women. "It was the loudest racecourse I have ever rowed on," recalled Mary Whipple, coxswain of the winning American team.

At the world championships in France last summer, Britain's women's eight team didn't look like a squad poised to claim Olympic gold. They finished fourth behind the U.S., New Zealand and Canada.



Britain's women's eight team practices in Lagoa before the Rio Games. PHOTO: ANDRE PENNER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

But at a world cup event in Switzerland in May, the British women's eight team took silver, finishing less than a second behind the winning U.S. boat.

"We are pushing the Americans very close," said Jessica Eddie, a British eight rower in 2008 and 2012 who will compete in Rio.

"The British are incredibly strong," said Meghan Musnicki, a member of the 2012 U.S. team who will race against Eddie again in Rio.

The British might take hope from the fact that Mary Whipple has retired. She was cox of the gold-medal-winning American team not only in London but also in Beijing in 2008.

But Whipple's absence has hardly slowed the Americans. At last summer's world championships, the Americans took their 10th consecutive world women's eight title since 2006, and they are vying to make Rio their 11th. A first-place finish in Brazil would give the U.S. women's eight their third straight Olympic gold in that event, and their fourth overall.

Behind the long American run is depth, built through a continuous pipeline. Three years after Tom Terharr became head coach of the women's team in 2001, it won silver at the 2004 Olympics in Athens, ending a medal drought for the U.S. women's eight that dated back to 1984. Terharr, now 46, frequently changes team members to galvanize competition.

Under his leadership, a place on the national women's eight team became the dream of the top collegiate rowers across the country. "When he took the reins, he knew how to improve it," said Whipple.

For opponents, it's frustrating how the American team keeps winning with different rosters. Of the nine American women who medaled in Athens, only two competed on the gold medal-winning Beijing team. Six of the nine in Beijing competed on the title-winning London team.

It might be tempting for the British to take hope from the fact that only two members of America's 2012 eight squad will compete in Rio. But at last year's world championships, only one member of the gold-medal-winning

London team took a seat in America's boat—which finished first.

"The depth of squad is pretty incredible," said Steve Redgrave, Britain's five-time Olympic rowing gold-medalist.

The British women have also changed up their squad for Rio, and they believe the current mix might be their best yet. "I think this could be Britain's year," says team member Polly Swann.

Whipple, who now runs rowing camps, said Britain is "building momentum."

Strength, power and stamina needed for the eight's 2,000 meter, six-minute course require rowers to engage in heavy weightlifting. For coxes, mental focus and being light are key.

"I am trying to keep my weight down to 50 kilograms," said Katelin Snyder, Whipple's successor as U.S. cox and in the 2016 boat.

Which squad better adapts to the conditions of Rodrigo de Freitas lake at Rio's Lagoa Stadium venue will be pivotal, rowers say. A natural lake flowing to the Atlantic Ocean and flanked by city apartment blocks, it exposes boats to buffeting crosswinds, which caused a Serbian boat to capsize during a qualifying race Saturday and led to the postponement of all rowing events Sunday.

To cope, and gain an edge, the British are tapping technology. For two years, data scientists from U.S. software giant SAS tracked for each British rower the impact of stroke biomechanics on boat speed under varying race conditions.

“Improving by a tenth or hundredth [of a second] could make the difference,” said SAS analyst Steve Ludlow.

“We will know our race strategy inside out,” said Eddie.

Whipple, however, has no doubts that the American team can continue its triumphant streak without her.

If the Americans “can row their own race and develop their own identity, winning will take care of itself,” Whipple said.