

# Rowing's Caryn Davies Goes Out In Style

BY KAREN ROSEN | APRIL 15, 2015, 10:14 P.M. (ET)



*The Oxford women's team celebrates winning The Newton Investment Management Women's Boat Race on April 11, 2015 in London.*

Olympic champion Caryn Davies checked off the last two items on her rowing bucket list in the first 11 days of April.

Last Saturday, Davies competed in the world-renowned Boat Race on the River Thames in London, an especially historic occasion as women raced for the first time on the same day and on the same course as the men. With Davies in the crucial stroke position, her Oxford student crew defeated Cambridge by  $6\frac{1}{2}$  lengths, a winning margin of 19 seconds.

"I felt like this was the last major race that I had never experienced," said Davies, who won Olympic gold medals in 2008 and 2012 in women's eight, an Olympic silver medal in 2004 and a boatload of world championships and world cup titles.

While that was certainly a high for Davies, the most decorated female rower in U.S. history, she also had been eager to experience one particular low.

On April Fools' Day of all days, Davies and her teammates swamped during practice and had to be rescued by the Chiswick Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

"What could have been a bad situation turned out to be no problem because there was that rescue boat nearby and nobody panicked," said Davies.

The boat had filled with so much water that it dropped below the surface, forcing the crew to perch atop it while waiting for help.

"We had a good laugh about it," said Davies, who celebrated her 33rd birthday Tuesday at home in Ithaca, New York, between Oxford academic terms. "I did say, 'I'm glad that I didn't end my 20-year rowing career without ever having swamped and now I've done it.'

"I can retire knowing that I really have done everything."

However, Davies' academic and athletic careers had to dovetail serendipitously for her to dip an oar in the Boat Race.

Only full-time students in degree-granting programs at Oxford or Cambridge can compete. Davies said that's why she decided to pursue her MBA at Oxford instead of at New York's Columbia University, where she earned her law degree in 2013.

Male friends would talk about the Boat Race "in reverent terms," Davies said, "and I wanted to be a part of it."

The men's boat race began in 1829 while the women's version started in 1927. However, in previous years the women's race was a separate event held on a different, shorter, course.

Davies credits Helena Morrissey, CEO of Newton Investment Management, an investment boutique under the umbrella of men's race sponsor BNY Mellon, for bringing the women's race to the same stage as the men's. The women's event was televised live for the first time by the BBC and about 250,000 people watched both races from the shore.

While Morrissey is a champion for gender equality in the corporate boardroom, Davies has been vocal in British media challenging British sport to adopt an equal opportunity mandate similar to Title IX in the U.S.

"In one word I would say it was inspirational," Davies said of the event on the Thames. "What had most value in the women moving to the Tideway to race on the same day over the same course as the men is that there were so many young women who either came out to watch us on the banks or watched us on TV who hopefully will be inspired to participate in sports."

Davies calls the 7-kilometer (about 4.2 miles) Boat Race "the physically hardest race of my life."

Because there are only two teams, it was important to get ahead early.

"They say the Boat Race is where two boats row side by side until one of them decides it can't win," she said. "We wanted to make Cambridge decide that as soon as possible."

With that accomplished in the first 2 minutes, Davies said, "You do the equivalent of an Olympic race, a 2K, and then you keep going for another 5K."

Unlike Olympic competition, there are no lanes.

"It is a very unpredictable course," Davies said. "You never know what is going to happen — you could see a log. So even though I felt confident most of the time, you can never really stop pushing it."

As the rower closest to the stern of the boat, the 6-foot-4 Davies not only had to establish the number of strokes per minute and rhythm, she also had to be on her best behavior.

The BBC had attached a camera to the boat right behind the coxswain, which was much more up-close-and-personal than Davies had encountered at any Olympic Games. "It was literally in my face the entire race," she said.

"And there was also a microphone near my feet. I was told that I shouldn't be swearing because it was on live television — not that I normally swear during a race — but some of the men's boats in previous years have gotten in trouble because they've sworn on live television and that was not OK with the BBC."

The BBC said the women's Boat Race is the most watched women's sporting event among its audience outside of Wimbledon, the Olympic Games and the Commonwealth Games.

In the week before the race, Davies enjoyed much more media attention than for the Olympic Games. She had many interview requests and was particularly thrilled to be featured on NPR.



*Caryn Davies of Oxford's women's crew looks on as the team embarks on a training outing ahead of the BNY Mellon Men's University Boat Race and the Newton Women's University Boat Race on The River Thames on April 9, 2015 in London.*

“Every time we walked into the boathouse, there were camera shutters clicking, and videos being taken — and that just doesn’t happen, at least not for rowing at the Olympics,” she said. “That’s the closest I’ve ever felt to being famous.”

At a dinner after the race, the active rowers and alumni who have competed for Oxford in the Boat Race have the right to wear a blue blazer. “So it was this sea of blue,” Davies said, “and so many guys came up to me and said, ‘Congratulations. You’re one of us now. You’re part of the club.’ It was really neat.”

Davies says Olympians share the same kind of bond.

The most decorated Olympian to compete in a Boat Race, male or female, Davies says she is now finished with major rowing competition.

She had announced her retirement from international competition after the London 2012 Olympic Games by sending a letter to the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency to remove her from the testing pool, but that didn’t preclude her from the Boat Race.

Davies has dual U.S./United Kingdom citizenship because her father is from London, a point of pride for her during the Boat Race. She said she toyed with the idea of competing for Great Britain at the Rio 2016 Olympic Games since the Team GB training center for rowing is only 45 minutes away from Oxford.

However, Davies said, “I decided it was time to move on and start real life.”

In other words: “Get a job.”

With a lot of her classmates already gainfully employed, “I feel a little bit left behind at this point,” said Davies, “but I made the decision to focus on the race.”

She would like to utilize both her law and business degrees by working at a law firm that is legal counsel for small start-up businesses. She is considering three cities at the moment: San Francisco, Boston and London.

But before Davies finishes her degree in September, she is making time for new experiences.

“I tried out for a play recently, didn’t get the part,” she said of “The Importance of Being Earnest” by Oscar Wilde. “Instead I’m going to be stage manager in July.

“I have so many different interests that I’m really excited to explore some other things now that I don’t have to spend so much time rowing.”

In her official USRowing biography, Davies lists her hobbies as sailing, horseback riding, ballroom dancing, downhill skiing and grocery shopping. As a senior at Harvard, she was on the competitive ballroom team. In 2013-14, Davies was a clerk to Judge Richard Clifton of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit in Honolulu, Hawaii, and took up Polynesian outrigger canoeing in Hawaii, winning the state novice championship.

“The way I have fun is I just throw myself into things,” she said.

Davies’ bio also cites her most memorable sporting achievement as “beating all of the boys in her class to win the third-grade arm wrestling championship.”

“I stand by that,” Davies said.

And yet, she may someday top it.

“Who knows what my next adventure will be?” Davies said. “It’s going forward instead of backward, which is sometimes terrifying. I don’t always want to look where I’m going.”

And now, when she’s no longer sitting in a boat rowing toward a finish line she cannot see, Davies must “literally and figuratively look to the future.”

Surely, she has many more bucket lists.

***Karen Rosen is an Atlanta-based sportswriter who has covered 14 Olympic Games. She has contributed to TeamUSA.org (<http://www.teamusa.org/>) since 2009.***

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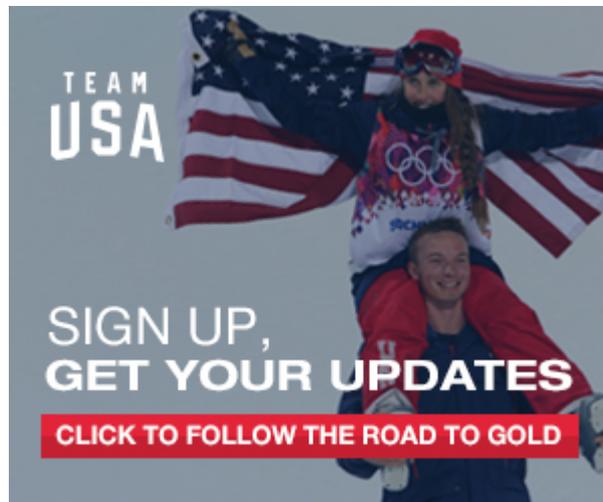


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