

This time it's just for the fun of it; Olympian Davies out to recapture joy on river

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The race tomorrow afternoon is all about the F-word, which has become all but taboo in a sport of blisters and lactic acid. "Rowing should always be fun, but this is particularly special for me," said Caryn Davies, who's favored to win the women's championship double sculls at the 42d Head of the Charles Regatta with former coach and perennial mentor Whitney Post. "It already is a fantastic reunion."

It's been seven years since Davies, then 17, stepped into a double with Post and finished fourth in the Head. Since then, she has become the best all-around oarswoman in the land, equally adept at pulling one oar or two, equally comfortable working the port or starboard side.

Most of Davies's medals have come from the eights - the Olympic silver from Athens, an NCAA title with Radcliffe, and two world golds, most recently as stroke of the US boat at this summer's global regatta in England. Most of her fun, though, comes in small boats like the double and pair and in events like the Head, where rowers from around the planet convene on the leaf-strewn Riva for one last 3-mile pull before heading indoors for the winter.

Davies could have joined her US Rowing teammates in their quest to retain their title in Sunday's championship eights, but that would be more of what she's usually had enough of by now.

The national team may be where the glory is, but it's also where the pressure is and with the Beijing Olympics less than two years away, Davies relishes a retro weekend that lets her go back to when the sport was joyful and easy, or at least seemed that way.

"Part of having success that young is that I was always very lucky at being in the right place at the right time," said Davies, who's still only 24. "I didn't have to think about it."

What she's learned over time, and still is learning, is that the water is not always smooth. Trying to separate life issues from rowing issues has been challenging. "I still carry tensions with me when I get into the boat," Davies confessed.

On the water, Davies appears easy and effortless, her tension morphing into a fierce fluidity. "Caryn is able to channel everything into moving the boat," said Radcliffe coach Liz O'Leary. "She has that long, elegant, almost graceful stroke."

Her grace masks a fearsome intensity, which Post soon noticed when she began coaching the teenage Davies in Ithaca, N.Y., where her father is a professor at Cornell. "What I saw was a lot of depth and a lot of tenacity and a lot of heart," said Post, a Wayland native and a former US team member. "She had all the internal talents."

Bursting onto scene

Davies was already a youth sculling champion and a world junior sweep gold medalist when she arrived in Cambridge. O'Leary, who rarely had rookies in her varsity, promptly plugged her into

the big boat. Davies might have been a freshman, but she was no novice. And at 6 feet 4 inches, she didn't need to look up to anybody.

"The Big One," teammate Michelle Guerette dubbed her, and Davies quickly became larger than life around Weld Boathouse. A year later, she found herself in the US eight at the 2002 world championships in Seville, where the Americans won the gold medal for the first time since 1995. "I had no idea what to expect," said Davies, who was the youngest member of the crew. "I had a lot of fun and I had a smile on my face the whole time. I was just so happy to be there."

Every boat she was in, it seemed, was gilded. The 'Cliffies won the national crown the next spring and Davies claimed another global gold with the American four in 2003. Then, Olympus beckoned and she took a year off from school to train in the Princeton pressure-cooker while her college teammates paddled on without her.

"I followed them online, I talked to Liz, and I went to the Sprints," Davies said. "I saw them struggle a little bit and that was difficult to see, but I knew everyone was trying their best."

Her Athenian sabbatical paid off in silver, the first medal for the women's eight at the Games in two decades. Davies could have called it a career then, but she was determined to row out her final season at Radcliffe, even though she knew it wouldn't be the same. "Everyone knows that at the end of the year, the senior class graduates and the freshmen come in and everything is going to change," Davies said.

Still, her reentry wasn't seamless. "Coming off an Olympic experience is a difficult thing to do, because everything that has been your focus for so long is ending," said O'Leary, a former Olympic rower and coach. "I think Caryn struggled with that. It was a draining experience for her."

A couple of months away from the boathouse replenished her, though, and Davies had a hugely satisfying senior year, which included an NCAA bronze medal. "It was my role to be a leader and a team player," she said, "and the feedback I got from my teammates at the end of the year was one of the best things that's happened to me in the sport."

Wherever she's needed

Being a team player at the national level means taking an oar (or two) if you're tapped for whatever the priority boat is for the season. Last year, for Davies, it was the quadruple sculls, where she and her seatmates placed fifth at the world regatta.

This year, Davies was back in the eight, this time as stroke, where she led the Americans to a wire-to-wire triumph over the Germans. "I watched that race and I was just awed by it," O'Leary said. "Caryn and [7-seat] Caroline Lind were just relentless."

Who can say where Davies will row next year or in Beijing? Her preference, she said, would be the pair or the double, but Davies also could row two events, as half of the women's eight did this year. But that's many bridges down the road. "I do think it's important to stay in the moment and think of it year by year, even race by race," she mused.

Tomorrow, it's the double, where Davies won last year's title with fellow Radcliffe alumna Anne Browning. This year, she thought it would be enjoyable to get back together with Post, who coached her then and consults with her now. They hadn't raced together in ages, but chatting on the phone was nearly as useful as sitting in a boat.

Yesterday morning, Davies and Post borrowed a double and took it out for a morning spin, just as the Charles was coming alive with eights and singles. Davies came back smiling. "She keeps the joy," said Post. "It's such a serious sport."

Not tomorrow afternoon. Not for them. Davies and Post may be the favorites, but they hadn't even checked the entry list yesterday. It isn't about a medal here. It's about the F-word. "If you see us not having fun out there," Post declared, "just throw something at us."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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