

The Curious Case of Leander and the Pink Hippo

By Michael Percy

Winning Olympic medals is one thing but the mark of true fame is to be the subject of a Mills and Boon calendar.

2011 was a relatively quiet year at Leander Rowing Club based in Henley-on-Thames. It was half way through the Olympic cycle and there were a lot of very fit rowers with time on their hands. Maybe that's why they agreed to be the subject of a glamour calendar – men only of course.

Leander and Mills and Boon may not be most peoples idea of a good fit but the coupling worked surprisingly well if only because they both share a fascination for the colour pink. Leander members wear pink ties and pink-ribboned boaters, the oar blades are pink and the club symbol is a pink hippopotamus. Mills and Boon have pink too, but only on their web site.

“The calendar raised a huge amount of money for the club,” explained Emma Gutteridge as she sold pink stuff in the Pink Hippo Shop to two huge rowers over for Henley Regatta from Massachusetts. “We reprinted it for 2012 in a desktop format and it just goes on selling,” she added.

You may well ask why the most successful single sport club on the planet with ninety-nine Olympic rowing medals splattered amongst its alumni gets excited about raising a few quid from sales of a racy calendar?

Leander spokesman Robert Treharne Jones explained: “We have a squad of 75 athletes of which about half are already members of the GB international team and the other half is in our Development Academy and they are aiming to be in the GB team. That is our whole *Raison d'être*: to continue our position as the leading provider of athletes into the GB rowing team. There are about 600 clubs around the country and other clubs do provide athletes to the GB team in ones and twos but we do it in quantity. For the 2012 Olympics twenty-two members of the GB team – almost half - will be Leander members.

“The Development Academy train out of the club and we look after their needs on and off the water. High quality coaching, the high quality boats, high quality nutrition from our chef here, physio support, media training; all that is needed to allow them to concentrate on their core activity costs the club in the region of £400,000 per year.”

Over half that money comes from the subscriptions of the club's 3500 members world wide. Full membership and entitlement to wear the pink regalia - pink socks, pink tie etc – is awarded to those who have competed at international level or made outstanding contributions to rowing. Standard membership is for those who do not meet the rowing criteria but who share the club ethos of teamwork, commitment and discipline.

The club has to earn the rest of the money from other sources which includes function hire, a top class restaurant, an exclusive hotel on site and of course small ventures like the Mills and Boon calendar - £5.99 from the Pink Hippo Shop.

Leander was founded in 1818 on the Thames in London. By 1831 Leander was recognised as being an important boat club and having some of the finest rowers in the world. In 1897 the club moved to Henley home of the

Henley Regatta which started in 1839 and was one of the earliest competitive rowing events in the world.

The 1908 Olympic rowing was held at Henley and Leander began its collection of Olympic medals with two gold and two silver medals accumulated from only four events on its home waters.

Nearly two centuries and 99 medals later the club is confident that the 2012 Olympics will see their Olympic medal tally pass the one hundred mark. In the early days it was a case of a few chaps from university getting together to represent their club and the nation. Today Leander has turned itself into a machine with the single goal of producing international quality rowers. This benefits the club and very definitely the continuing success of British rowing.

Leander operates an open door selection policy which considers experienced athletes as well as phone calls from the parents of boys and girls who have shown an aptitude for the sport. But there is fierce competition for talent amongst rowing clubs, many of which have top coaches available. And Leander has faced accusations in the past of poaching the best rowers.

Foundation Academy coach Lavinia Cowell-Sherriff has become Leander's secret weapon in the fight to find new rowing talent. "I link with about eleven local schools where I spend a day at each testing young people who are recommended as possible rowers by their sports masters. They can be as young as fifteen. We do not go into the private schools because many of them row already.

"We're looking for the right build and then we test for strength using a machine called a Concept 2 Dyno and something called a Schwinn bike where we are testing for endurance – to see whether they've got the get-up-and-go to push themselves. At the moment I have seven juniors in my development squad."

Oliver Collinson from Icknield Community College in Watlington and Sam Dawson from Forest School near Reading were both brought into the Leander Academy as juniors by Lavinia early this year

Lavinia explained: "We started gently with them – Wednesday and Friday after school and weekend afternoons. We get them on the rowing machine and the rest of the time we do technical stuff and circuit training using their own body weight. When they're good enough we get them out on the water. We couldn't do much on the water here in the winter so we took them to Spain with some of our senior academy people in February. They were paddling about with floats on their boats so they wouldn't fall out. During the summer I went with them to various regattas in a quad (four rowers in a boat) where they were entered as juniors – they've been racing and racing and racing.

"The aim was to get them ready to represent Leander at Henley Regatta in the Fawley Cup for junior rowers. We didn't really expect to make qualification but they came in the top eight out of forty-two crews. In their first side by side race they were beaten by a more experienced Australian quad. But none of them would have believed back in January they would be competing at Henley Regatta. That experience is priceless."

Once upon a time a boy from a comprehensive school in Marlow was carrying his boat across the same jetty used by Lavinia's junior squad and climbing into a tiny seat in those impossibly narrow craft. His name was Steve Redgrave. Five of the Leander Olympic gold medals have his name on them.

Pictures of famous rowers ancient and modern look down from the walls of Leander on these young athletes as they learn the complex art of rowing. And rowing heroes from the recent past walk among them as coaches and supporters of the Leander ethos.

Matthew Pinsent (four Olympic golds and countless other rowing achievements) came down to the jetty to see off Lavinia's crew as they prepared for their race in this year's Henley Regatta just six months after taking up blades for the first time. He is a man who does not waste words but his mere presence had a magical effect on the team's morale and desire to do well for their club and eventually for their country.

SIDE BAR

These are the schools that Leander currently visit in their search for fresh rowing talent.

Icknield Community College (Watlington)

Chiltern Edge (Sonning Common)

John Madejski Academy (Reading)

The Forest School (Winnersh)

Maiden Erleigh (Earley)

Waingels (Woodley)

Henley College (Henley)

St Josephs College (Reading)

Langtree (Woodcote, Reading)

Hoping to link with

Gillotts School