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WHEN THE OLYMPICS CAME TO CHATTANOOGA

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A quarter century ago, the magic of the Olympics lit up Chattanooga like a wildfire. It was common to see Olympic rowers, like Greek gods and goddesses, gliding in their shells along the Tennessee River. For three years, Chattanoogaans watched these dynamic rowers transform from college graduates into Olympians.

The 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games brought these rowers to Chattanooga. Scores of them trained at the William C. Raoul Rowing Center from 1994-1996 and many local families opened their homes to support them. These families had a behind-the-scenes look at some of the challenges the athletes faced on their rise toward Olympus. One of those families were the Pattens, who opened their doors to many female rowers.

In crew, swing is when teammates are in sync with each other, and the Pattens had plenty of swing. In 1993, the rowing center was built in Chattanooga and Lee Patten was a board member of Lookout Rowing Club (LRC), one of the three teams housed there. By 1994, Ashlee Patten, Lee's daughter, was a recent national rowing champion from Princeton University and accepted the position as the Assistant National Team Coach for rowing in Chattanooga. No one has to consult an oracle or have the stars align to know that was a lot of swing.

The push to have Olympic rowers train in Chattanooga came from Robert Espeseth, the current rowing coach at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and Hartmut Buschbacher, the U.S. national rowing coach at the time.

"Hartmut wanted the women to have their own place and feel good training for the Olympics," Ashlee said.

To make this happen, the rowing community got involved to ensure there were places for the athletes to live and thrive while preparing. There were regularly 20-30 female and male rowers training in Chattanooga from 1994-1996; they all needed housing, food, work, consistency and emotional support.

"People got invited to train for weeks or months. There was always a steady stream of visiting rowers who needed free places to stay," Ashlee said.

Ashlee was responsible for ensuring the athletes had safe, supportive places to live. Most of the athletes came from Stanford, Harvard and Princeton and their families lived several states away. As a result, the local host families ended up becoming surrogate families for the athletes.

Lee recalled Ashlee phoning her a few times, asking, "Mom, you don't mind if we put another rower at our house, do you?" It was common to see the rowers drive up in "small, economical cars with a futon strapped to the top and a dog hanging out the side window," Lee added.

Barbara Byrne, now Barbara Byrne Stefan, was one the athletes who stayed with the Pattens. Barbara, who rowed a single, was the youngest of seven children and the daughter of the former governor of New Jersey.

Avery Patten, Ashlee's 10-year-old little sister, shared a room with Barbara and Lika, her dog. Avery loved having the athletes around and described herself as "paddling after them." As a result, a few people mentioned that they saw her as their mascot.

The athletes "brought enthusiasm and verve to your whole household. Think about it, they were young women in training. Rowing is a very different sport than other sports. There is a tremendous amount of dependency to show up," Lee said. "What your family did was absorb them into your life and wish them well."

The athletes needed a stable home life since their intense six-day-per-week training schedule was grueling. Avery said, "They woke up at 5:30 a.m., rowed until 10 a.m., slept from 10 until 3, and worked out with weights in the afternoon. Then they ate and went to bed."

Whether they were training or in public, the athletes tended to draw attention. During training, Lee said, "The McCallie boys were quite taken with the fact that these Greek Goddesses had come in." She chuckles while remembering how Chattanoogaans would stop to stare at the extremely fit, 6-foot-tall rowers.

Despite the unwanted attention, the rowers were focused on their routine. To adhere to such a strict routine required discipline. Lee mentioned that, "Everything they ate, wore, and times (to be places) were dictated by their training schedule. Every day counted...No one broke routine."

Why was such discipline necessary? According to Daniel James Brown, author of *The Boys in the Boat: Nine Americans and Their Epic Quest for Gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics*, "Physiologists, in fact, have calculated that rowing a two-thousand-meter race—the Olympic standard—takes the same physiological toll as playing two basketball games back-to-back. And it exacts that toll in about six minutes."

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With such an extraordinary challenge facing crew members, one may think that competition in the boat house would be fierce. On the contrary, Lee said, “There was never competition going on. They kept the competition to themselves.” While everyone was striving for a seat “in” the boat, there wasn’t room for competition “on” the boat. The individual rower must be disciplined and have trained hard, however, competition kills unification of the team and getting a swing that is essential for winning races.

If not competing openly was a silent rule, then defining boundaries in the boat house and at home was another. Since Lee was on the LRC board, she wanted the athletes to have a separation between home and training.

“I never went to see them practice. I felt like they needed a stable home life. So I didn’t watch them at practice. I didn’t

discuss rowing. I (only) talked about their personal lives with them.”

Ashlee expressed how important it is for athletes in their prime to have “supportive people who will be there physically and emotionally. It’s a huge physical and emotional peak to compete (and win). They can crash hard...It’s important to have someone be there to catch them.”

Along this journey, injuries and ailments were common for the athletes. Barbara got sick while training for the Pan Am Games and couldn’t take medicine due to fear of being disqualified for the Olympics. Lee took care of her and said, “At the time, I had tremendous fibromyalgia. Stacy and Louisa (rowers staying with the Pattens) would sit down with me and said, ‘You’re going through your own Olympic training. If we’re going through this, you can go through that.’”



The defending world champion U.S. women's eight.

Photo: Oli Rosenblatt



“Do I have a **gold medal** in my house?”

After Barbara healed, she rowed a single in the Pan Am Games in Argentina. Once Barbara returned from the competition, Lee knew she couldn't ask Barbara if she won or lost. It was too exciting for Lee to imagine if Barbara had won, and she didn't want to bring down her morale if she had lost.

Instead, Lee asked her, “Barb, did you do what you wanted to do?” Barbara ducked her head and said, “Yes.” Later in the day, Lee recounted that she was “swimming at the Y and thought, ‘I think I have a gold medal at my house.’ I came back home and I said, ‘Barbara Byrne, do I have a gold medal in my house?’ Barbara said, ‘Yes, you do.’”

Barbara hit a peak winning a gold medal in the Pan Am Games, but no one close to her had seen it. With such extreme highs and lows, Ashlee said, “If you don't have someone there to celebrate with, it's almost like it didn't happen. You go from the top of the world to being alone when there is no one to share it with you...If no one is there to see, did it happen?”

While training for the Olympic Games in Atlanta, the National Women's Eight Rowing Team won gold at the World Championship in Finland in 1995. Since no one was there to witness the team's win and there wasn't a guaranteed medal in the upcoming Olympics, the Pattens and the local rowing community threw a huge party at Ashland Farms, a family estate outside of Chattanooga, to commemorate their win as World Champions.

Two hundred people showed up to celebrate the athletes. “I wasn't surprised that the community was supportive,” Ashlee said. “They liked having the team here. They followed them.”

The athletes tended to be shy, despite drawing attention to themselves due to their height and toned physical condition. They weren't used to having attention on them. At the event, Lee partnered each athlete with an outgoing member of the community, encouraging them to mingle and banning the athletes from hiding in the kitchen. To celebrate the athletes, their medals hung from trees, Mary Tanner sang the National Anthem, the Fort Oglethorpe military color guard performed, and the athletes' names were announced while walking down the

historical staircase to cheers of “USA.”

After the party, Lee realized that, “We were not holding an Olympic party. We were holding a patriotic party.”

When it came time to travel to Atlanta for the Olympics, sisters Mary and Betsy McCagg, known as “The Twins,” and Monica Tranel Michini, who had stayed with the Pattens, were selected for the Women's Coxed Eight team. The U.S. team was favored to win after beating the Canadian team at the 1996 Lucerne Rotsee Regatta by 3 seconds. During the 2,000 meters of the Olympic regatta, the U.S. team battled against Romania, Canada and Belarus, missing a medal by 1.75 seconds.

While friends and family were stunned by their fourth place finish, Monica told Avery that, “I will not be defined by defeat.” That attitude may be what defines an Olympian.

Around the time of the ancient Olympics, Lao-Tsu, a Chinese philosopher, reportedly said, “Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.” The same can be said for Olympic athletes and those who support them. Rowing is a quick sport filled with intense dedication, training and adrenaline. Once athletes reach a peak there is only one way to go afterward. When the 1996 Olympic flame went out, the athletes left Chattanooga and the Pattens went back to their life at Ashland Farms where U.S. flags once flew, gold medals hung from trees and World Champion Goddesses mingled among mortals.

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