

THE ERA OF POLARIZATION

135. Modern Orthodoxy in Italy

Nilsen – Abbagnale Brothers – La Mura – de Capua



Ted Nash Collection

Italian Technique

Throughout the 20th Century, Italy has had a very strong and well-supported rowing program. During the Mussolini era of the 1930s, Italian athletes received national support rivaling that of their Nazi German counterparts. The Italian Silver Medal eights in **1932** and **1936** were especially memorable, missing Gold by a combined .6 seconds and beating the Germans in 1936 in front of der Führer.

In 1960, the Italians boated a coxless-four that was only beaten by the U.S. in the last 200 meters, and in **1964**, their coxed-four pressed Ratzeburg all the way down the course in another Silver Medal performance.

The Azzurri⁴²⁴¹ have always been on the cutting edge of rowing technique, as they were at the 1932 Olympics in Long Beach.

The New York Times: “At no time over the 2,000 meters were the blue-shirted men lower than 39 or 40 strokes to the minute, and toward the end their minimum was 42.

“Italy maintained an extremely high stroke throughout the race, which is characteristic of its style of rowing, featured like the American, by its short back swing, choppy stroke and short slide.”⁴²⁴²

That revolutionary 1932 crew rowed a Fairbairnesque *Schubschlag* pullthrough, but with an abbreviated 2nd Generation Conibear backswing and a rhythm which predated Karl Adam’s identical approach by more than two decades.

⁴²⁴¹ “The Blues.” All Italian teams wear blue uniforms.

⁴²⁴² Allison Danzig, *The New York Times*, August 14, 1932

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Many Italian crews of the 1950s and 1960s also resembled the Ratzeburg approach, but given the long history, who is to say whether the Italians were influenced by Ratzeburg or vice versa?

Since 1945, Italian rowing has been generously funded by *totocalcio*, the national soccer lottery, and a number of sports clubs aligned with major manufacturers such as Moto Guzzi and with government agencies such as the national police, finance police and navy.

For example, **Carlo Gaddi** won eight World Championships in twenty-one years in the Italian national team. He “credits his longevity to C.S. Forestale, the sporting arm of the Italian forestry service that pays him a salary to train.

“Thanks to this arrangement, we can train full time, says Gaddi, who is yet to plant a tree or battle a wildfire in the two decades he’s been cashing forest service paychecks. When he retires from competition [2004], Gaddi looks forward to a secure future as a forest ranger near his hometown.”⁴²⁴³

Using lottery money, rowing federation president Paolo d’Aloja hired **Thor Nilsen** in 1980 to build a state-of-the-art sports laboratory and training center at Lago de Piediluco in the central Italian region of Umbria, “and Nilsen began to apply new advances in the science of physiology to Italian team athletes.”⁴²⁴⁴

Technique

Thor brought to Piediluco the **Modern Orthodox Technique**. He referred to it as the **Natural Technique**, and the Italians

referred to it as the **Rosenberg Style**, and even though it was the Italian coaches themselves who deserve the credit for working directly with the athletes, it was Nilsen who set them on the path to two decades of **Modern Orthodoxy**.

“Thor introduced a systematic year-round training programme aimed at high performance in the international arena. He created technical, physiological and musculoskeletal conditions specifically aimed at developing athletes for rowing. These were supplemented with supervision of technique, observation of physical parameters and experience of competition.

“Preparation was for endurance, strength and flexibility. Aerobic conditioning was emphasized rather than the interval training prevalent in Italian clubs during the ‘70s.

“Italian results improved from 1981.”⁴²⁴⁵



Author

Thor Nilsen

He also invited “as many as forty national teams to train in Piediluco each year. This gave Italian athletes the

⁴²⁴³ Jeff Moag, *The Italian Job*, *Rowing News*, May, 2004, p. 60

⁴²⁴⁴ Jeff Moag, *The Italian Job*, *Rowing News*, May, 2004, p. 57

⁴²⁴⁵ Dodd, *World*, p. 133

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FISA, 1991 Video

Italian Coxed Pair

Coxswain **Giuseppe di Capua**, bow **Carmin Abbagnale**, stroke **Giuseppe Abbagnale**
1984, 1988 Olympic Champions; 1981, 1982, 1985, 1987, 1989, 1990, 1991 World Champions
1992 Olympic Silver, 1986, 1993, 1994 World Silver, 1983 World Bronze
-5°, +35° to (-10° in stroke, -20° in bow), 0-8, 0-9, 5-10, ferryman's finish

Modern Orthodox Hybrid-concurrent *Schubschlag*

Savarino: Legs dominate in photos 1 through 4, then the back (5 - 6),
and then back and arms together (7 - 9).

opportunity to spar with the world's best and discover they could beat them.

“They lost respect for the top people from the other countries,” Nilsen says. “That was the best input that we could give them during that period.”⁴²⁴⁶

Angelo Savarino, formerly assistant coach with the Italian National Team and now head coach at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in Great Britain, has

worked with all the great Italian coaches of the last thirty years: “Thor Nilsen was appointed as consultant in Italy in 1980 and Technical Director in 1981. The situation that he found was very dramatic. During the 1970's, the Federazione Italiana Canottaggio (FIC) had given very little support to coaches and athletes. There was no head coach but instead a board of coaches, often with contradictory ideas based on their personal experiences instead of on studies or research.

“Nilsen's biggest improvement was central organization. He brought up the

⁴²⁴⁶ Jeff Moag, *The Italian Job*, *Rowing News*, May, 2004, p. 57

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FISA, 1984 Video

Italian Coxed Pair

Stroke **Giuseppe Abbagnale** 6'2" 187 cm 214 lb. 97 kg,

Bow **Carmine Abbagnale** 6'0" 182 cm 198 lb. 90 kg,

Coxswain **Giuseppe di Capua**

-5°, +35° to (-10° in stroke, -20° in bow), 0-8, 0-9, 5-10, ferryman's finish

Hybrid concurrent pullthrough with the back as the unifying element.

Initial legs were aggressive but continuous and not explosive.

level of the athletes and the coaches, organized coaching conferences with high quality international speakers: physiologists, doctors and coaches, and he invited foreign crews (such as the Russian and U.S. teams) to train with the Italians in Piediluco so that our athletes could see for the first time that was possible to beat them.

"With Nilsen, the Italians learned that winning requires method, know-how and organization.

"Among his greatest successes were the accomplishments of the lightweight team from 1980 to 1991. They won a lot of Gold Medals in those years, seven just in the lightweight eight.

"All this was accomplished under lightweight coach **Giovanni Postiglione**, now Technical Director of Greece after working with Spain during 2003 and 2004. Nilsen designed the program and set the

tone, and then the direct coaching was carried out by Italians."⁴²⁴⁷

The Abbagnale Brothers

Castellamare di Stabia is an ancient town located on the Bay of Naples south of Pompeii. In Roman times, it was known for its beautiful frescoed villas.

Two members of the Circolo Nautico Stabia, **Carmine and Giuseppe Abbagnale**, won the Under-23 Championship in the coxed-pair in 1980 and then dominated the event at the elite level for fourteen years through 1994, medaling every single year and winning nine times.

Their coach was their uncle, **Dr. Giuseppe La Mura**, called 'Il Dottore'⁴²⁴⁸ by everyone.⁴²⁴⁹

⁴²⁴⁷ Savarino, personal correspondence, 2006

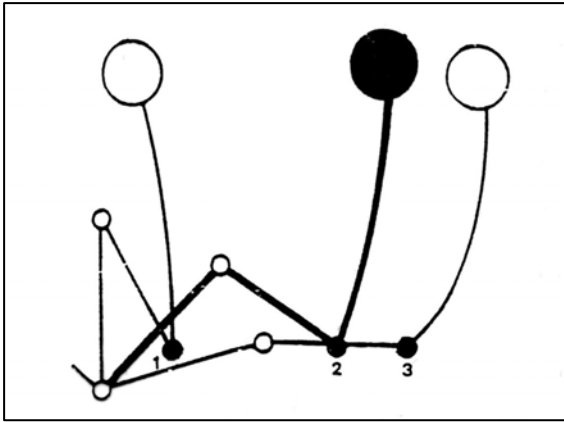
⁴²⁴⁸ The Doctor

⁴²⁴⁹ Savarino, personal correspondence, 2006

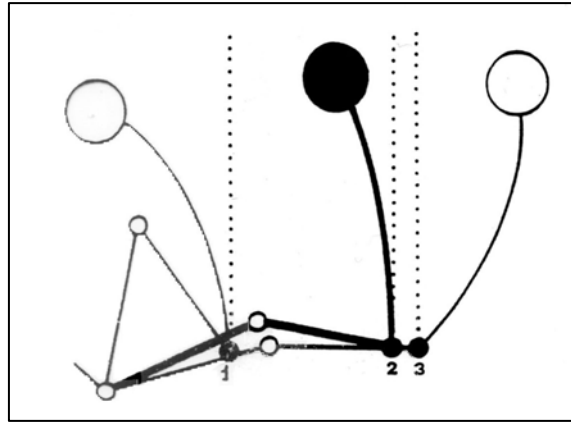
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“La Mura’s interest in rowing began at Circolo Nautico, and he describes being instantly ‘bewitched’ by the sport. Although

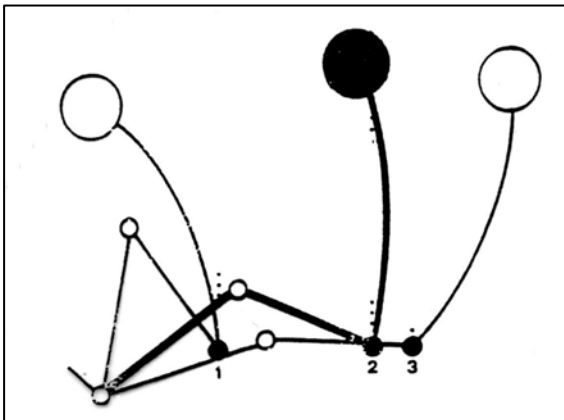
Savarino: “La Mura moved beyond Rosenberg’s technique. He really focused on a ‘two-part’ drive, first legs and then



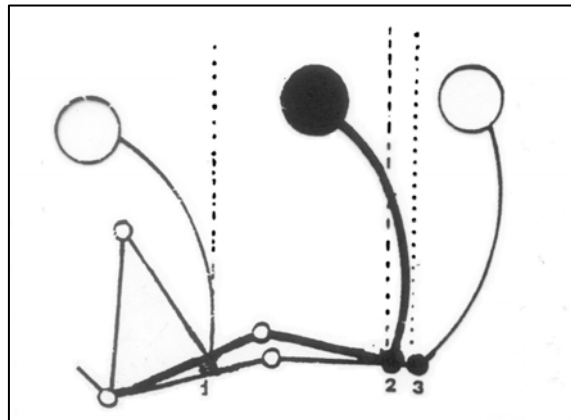
Karl Adam



Rosenberg



GDR



Rosenberg – La Mura

Giuseppe La Mura

Techniche a Confronto – Azione Atri Inferiori e Tronco
(Pullthrough Technique –Actions of the Lower Limbs and Trunk)

medical studies cut La Mura’s two-year rowing stint short, he returned to the sport after graduation and was persuaded to coach by his friend.⁴²⁵⁰

Rosenberg-La Mura Technique

⁴²⁵⁰ www.fisa.org, *The Outstanding Achievements of La Mura*, 5/11/03

back and arms together.

“He taught that it was a mistake to see a lot of splash on entry, but it was better see splashes toward the bow because that meant the catch came as the athlete was finishing the recovery, while a splash to the stern meant cutting the stroke length at the catch.

“The **Rosenberg-La Mura Technique**, as he called it, emphasized strong effort at the catch made with immediate and very strong leg drive. They were then to try to

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maintain the same pressure generated by the legs by using together back and arms to the finish.”⁴²⁵¹

Savarino’s verbal description sounds a bit like *Kernschlag*, but the Abbagnales were very much *Schubschlag* rowers “maintaining the same pressure.” In fact, despite the increased emphasis on leg drive, at no time from the catch to the ferryman’s finish was the back motion interrupted.

This is another example of hybrid-concurrency. Legs and backs were both straining from the entry, but the leg drive was easily aggressive enough to immobilize the backs until mid-stroke, much in the manner of the post-Conibear pullthrough of the 1957 Cornell crew.⁴²⁵²

The result was that legs finished the majority of their motion relatively early, but the force application remained consistent all the way to the release thanks to the very impressive and unifying back swing which accompanied the last few inches of the leg drive.

The La Mura schematics on this page reflect the posture of the Abbagnales and the horizontality of their back swing. It was horizontality which was one of the Rosenberg Technique’s most influential aspects.⁴²⁵³

The brothers broke their arms relatively late, a characteristic also of some but not all GDR crews.

Savarino: “This was what La Mura was coaching, catching the water only with the wrists, feeling the pressure on the blade and the footstretcher, and *not* on the seat, which is what happens if you lift and open the back.

“Just a little before you have the legs straight, then you open the back and pull in with the arms.”⁴²⁵⁴

⁴²⁵¹ Savarino, personal correspondence, 2006

⁴²⁵² see p. xxx

⁴²⁵³ See p. xxx

⁴²⁵⁴ Savarino, personal correspondence, 2006

Training

“The brothers had tree-trunk thighs and beer-barrel chests, but Giuseppe stood 6’2” and Carmine just 5’11½”,”⁴²⁵⁵ but they regularly beat taller and heavier pairs, gradually separating themselves from the field at relatively high ratings with their superior endurance.

Journalist **Sergio Morana:** “The



FISA, 1991 Video

Italian Coxed Pair

Carmine exhausted, **Giuseppe** collapsed, **Giuseppe di Capua** celebrating.

Abbagnales taught Italy that even two athletes of unexceptional characteristics can become almost unbeatable by training with exceptional seriousness.”⁴²⁵⁶

Savarino: “This technique was possible only with the very hard La Mura training program. They did not go to the training camps in Piediluco or in St. Moritz before the Olympics, but instead trained with their uncle on the sea [Gulf of Naples] at home in Castellamare di Stabia.”⁴²⁵⁷

⁴²⁵⁵ Jeff Moag, *The Italian Job*, *Rowing News*, May, 2004, p. 55

⁴²⁵⁶ Qtd. by Jeff Moag, *The Italian Job*, *Rowing News*, May, 2004, p. 55

⁴²⁵⁷ Savarino, personal correspondence, 2006

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“At the heart of La Mura’s system is an almost inhuman workload. Each month consists of three ‘loading weeks’ followed by a slightly more humane recovery week. The typical training schedule is six hours a day, split between morning and afternoon sessions. The punishing program includes seemingly endless successions of high intensity pieces from ten to twenty minutes in duration.”⁴²⁵⁸

“Other rowers at the Circolo Nautico Stabia also followed the La Mura program, and they won something like three Olympic and fifteen World Gold Medals, and soon the Italian National Team as a whole was being led by La Mura.”⁴²⁵⁹

Giuseppe La Mura



Antonio Baldacci

Giuseppe La Mura

In 2003, when La Mura was named International Coach of the Year, **FISA**

⁴²⁵⁸ Jeff Moag, *The Italian Job*, *Rowing News*, May, 2004, p. 57

⁴²⁵⁹ Savarino, personal correspondence, 2006

imagined what La Mura’s trophy room would look like: “One wall would be dedicated solely to World Championship medals, and on it a veritable wallpaper of twenty-eight Gold, twenty-one Silver and twenty-one Bronze Medals would hang.

“The next wall would be dedicated to Olympic medals and include two Golds, two Silvers and one Bronze.

“Then one wall would be exclusively for La Mura’s years as coach at Circolo Nautico Stabia from 1980 to 1992 when he collected fourteen World Championship Gold, two Silver and two Bronze medals as well as picking up three Olympic Golds.

“Finally, the fourth wall would be devoted to junior and under-23 rowing, with a stack of medals yet to be counted.

“This is reality for a man described by his technical assistant, Antonio Alfine, as ‘charismatic, a highly cultured man that knows human nature very well.’ He is seen as studious when it comes to his sport and absolutely dedicated.

“The first Olympic Gold Medal came La Mura’s way in **1984** when he coached Carmine and Giuseppe Abbagnale to Gold in the coxed-pair. Four years later in **1988**, the pair won Gold again in a race La Mura describes as the win he is most proud of.

“La Mura says he still looks back to Carmine and Giuseppe Abbagnale when he wants to demonstrate examples of good technique, but he also admires the East German crews from the 1970’s and cites German single sculling great, **Thomas Lange**, as the rower he most admires.

“La Mura uses perception and intuition in his coaching style. ‘I try to foresee an athlete’s technical, physiological and psychological compatibility and their attitude to be trained,’ says La Mura.

“‘I’ve seen passion growing and fear of intensive training decreasing,’ says La Mura whose favourite workout for athletes is

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endurance running and overloading exercises.

“On receiving the Coach of the Year award, La Mura admitted, ‘My happiness is mixed with surprise.’ La Mura was nominated along with Canada’s men’s coach, Mike Spracklen, and he admits that his admiration for Spracklen meant that he did not expect to be selected.⁴²⁶⁰

Giuseppe de Capua



www.canotaggio.org

Beppe de Capua

Giuseppe de Capua,⁴²⁶¹ known to all affectionately as “Beppe,” was Head Coach for the Italian senior team, sweep and scull, from 1980 to 1992, and beginning in 1988, Italy medaled in the men’s quad thirteen of the next fifteen years, including six Golds.

De Capua Technique

⁴²⁶⁰ www.fisa.org *The Outstanding Achievements of La Mura*, 11/5/03

⁴²⁶¹ **Di** Capua was the coxswain for the Abbagnales. **De** Capua is the coach.

After de Capua moved on, La Mura coached two members of the 1988 Olympic Gold Medal quad to another Gold in the men’s double at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

Stroke-man **Agostino Abbignale**, younger brother to Carmine and Giuseppe, rowed the **Rosenberg-La Mura Technique**. Bow-man **Davide Tizzano**, who had rowed for De Capua through 1991 and then spent two ‘sabbatical’ years in USA competing as a member of the Italian challenger for the America’s Cup, rowed the **de Capua Technique**. It was very similar to the technique that **Thor Nilsen** had taught Thorsen and Hansen in the early 1980s. The beginning of Tizzano’s pullthrough was the same, the back participating in the entry, but with the legs predominant. The back and legs then continued concurrently. Unlike the Norwegians, however, Tizzano’s arms finished the stroke with his back immobile, eliminating the ferryman’s finish.

Savarino: “While Tizzano was following the lessons of Nilsen and De Capua, Agostino followed La Mura and for years was later used as an example of technique for the Italian team.

“If you look at Agostino, his catch involved no back motion at all. The legs were more assertive than Tizzano’s. His back motion only really started in Photo 4.

“By contrast, Davide started to open the back earlier during the leg drive (Photos 1 - 4). You can see light between his trunk and legs.

“You can also see that Davide’s finish was only with his arms, while Ago’s was back and arms together (Photos 7 - 9). In Photo 6, you can really see different angles of the two backs. In Photo 8, Davide already at full lean back, and Ago still pulling with his back and arms.”

Shoulder and arm definition on both athletes matched that of the earlier Nilsen-coached Norwegian athletes, but though the arms were visibly straining right from the

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FISA, 1996 Video

1996 Italian Heavyweight Double

Bow **Davide Tizzano** 6'3" 190 cm 209 lb. 95 kg,
Stroke **Agostino Abbagnale** 6'2" 188 cm 212 lb. 96 kg

1996 Olympic Champion, Lake Lanier

Tizzano (de Capua Technique): -5° , $+35^{\circ}$ to -30° , 0-8, 0-8, 4-10 (motion)
Abbagnale (La Mura Technique): 0° , $+35^{\circ}$ to -30° , 0-9, 2-10, 4-10 (motion)

In both cases, motion was hybrid-concurrent.

entry all the way to the release, they tended to break later than for their Norwegian predecessors.

Force application for both was *Schubschlag*, ticking it along at a relatively high rating, and the general impression was of smoothness and relaxation.

Transitions in Italy

"Nilsen was released as Technical Director after the 1991 Worlds, and the Italian Federation next appointed East German **Dr. Theo Körner**, who had been working with the Australians after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

"But the time had come to finally have an Italian Technical Director, and the choice was **Giuseppe La Mura** for his amazing results, not only with the Abbagnales but also with a lot of his athletes in the better boats of the Italian team, men like Massimo

Paradiso, Ciccio Esposito, his son, Carmine La Mura, and many others.

"It must be stated that without the leadership and example of Nilsen, the outstanding results of La Mura during the following years would surely have been impossible. Nilsen had made it possible for La Mura to give his central leadership to an entire country that now looked to Piediluco for training programs, guidelines about technique and for sports science support.

"**Franco Parnigotto**, staff coach in Piediluco with Thor, has said: 'Nilsen brought to the sports university schoolboys coming from the secondary schools. La Mura found athletes already graduated who wanted change. He found faculty and some diplomated that at least knew how to study.'⁴²⁶²

⁴²⁶² www.canottaggiovero.com, 3/16/05)

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“La Mura’s program for the National Team was really hard training, not only for the overall mileage (about 260 km a week, including rowing and running) but also for the intensity of the workouts. Every training session was closely supervised, and we monitored the speed of the boats during sessions, and in a typical winter outing kept it near to 80-85% of the Gold Medal standard at 20-22 strokes per minute.

“The best example of the La Mura technique was for years the Abbagnale brothers. (How many hours showing the same tapes of them to how many rowers, Doctor?)”⁴²⁶³

⁴²⁶³ Savarino, personal correspondence, 2006

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136. *Kernschlag* Takes Hold in Italy

Pettinari and Luini versus Sycz and Kucharski

Thor Nilsen's original approach to rowing had been his "natural" offshoot of GDR Technique, but by the time he had reached Italy, it had evolved into a *Schubschlag* version of Modern Orthodoxy.

In the hands of Italian coaches, Modern Orthodoxy then mutated into two separate and conflicting strains.

One strain was represented by the La Mura-coached Abbagnale coxed-pair and the heavyweight double- and quad-scullers. It emphasized ***Schubschlag* force application** with its hybrid-concurrent pullthroughs.

The other strain in Italian Modern Orthodoxy, seen most distinctly among lightweight men coached by **Giovanni Postiglione**, had evolved into ***Kernschlag* force application**.

Of course, as happened to English Orthodoxy, to Fairbairnism, to 1st Generation Conibear, to the technique of George Pocock, of the University of Wisconsin, of Frank Muller in Philadelphia and to Allen Rosenberg, approaches to rowing tend to evolve and often degrade as they are passed down to another generation of coaches. Hybrid-concurrent motion tends to mutate into sequential muscle recruitment which inevitably mutates into segmented pullthroughs, but that did not happen in the best of the *Kernschlag* branch of the Italian National Crews.

Nilsen: "I *don't* want an explosion at the front. I want to catch in a natural, flowing way."⁴²⁶⁴

Interestingly, Giuseppe La Mura coached both strains, both branches, the *Schubschlag* heavyweight men in small boats and the *Kernschlag* lightweight men.

Savarino: "It was the conscious choice of La Mura to have aggressive catches, and it is important 'give to Caesar what is Caesar's.'

The *Kernschlag* Strain

The very best and most productive of the *Kernschlag* strain in Italian rowing is well illustrated by the four-time World Champion men's lightweight double of **Elia Luini** and **Leonardo Pettinari**, but rather than contrasting them with the Abbagnales, it is more useful to examine them in the context of their great antagonists in the lightweight double event, **Tomasz Kucharski** and **Robert Sycz** of Poland, for the *Schubschlag-Kernschlag* divide knows no international borders.

Since it was added to the Olympic program in 1996, the lightweight double has become one of the most competitive events in the world, and the two boats from Italy and Poland have had a most wonderful rivalry. It began in **1997** when Pettinari, already twice World Champion in the

⁴²⁶⁴ qtd. by Ferris, 1982, pp. 19-20

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lightweight pair and four, was still with his original double partner, **Michelangelo Crispi**. That year and in **1998**, it was Poland Gold, Italy Silver. In **1999**, the Poles had to drop out in St. Catherines due to illness, and the Italians won in their place.

At the **2000** Olympics in Sydney, Kucharski and Sycz won, with Pettinari and his young new partner, Luini, second. Then **2001**, **2002** and **2003** were three straight years of Italy first and Poland second.

In **2004**, Luini set a new ergometer World Record in January,⁴²⁶⁵ but after the Italians arrived in Athens, Pettinari suffered a rib fracture just before the regatta,⁴²⁶⁶ and their double failed to make the final, as Kucharski and Sycz won their second consecutive Olympic Gold.

Athens turned out to be the last meeting of these two boats. After the Games, the Italian double broke up, and Pettinari took on another partner. In 2005, Kucharski was injured, and Sycz was also rowing with a new partner. The final tally at the end of this great rivalry stood at four World Championships for Italy and two World and two Olympic Championships for Poland.

These were two *great* boats rowing two opposite techniques! “It was interesting to see the two lightweight doubles essentially the same speed. Both those boats were incredible physiological machines.”⁴²⁶⁷

The Italian crew was one of the most accomplished and experienced crews ever put together in any rowing event. Pettinari had won Bronze in the lightweight eight in 1995 and Gold in the lightweight pair the following year before he switched to the lightweight double, and Luini had been in the 1998 World Champion Lightweight Quad before joining Pettinari.

A comparison of the Italian and Polish crews highlights the salient aspects of the two trends in modern rowing today.

The pullthrough of the Polish crew was dominated by the 60° arc through which their backs swung. Force application was completely consistent, and acceleration from entry to release was steady and impressive.



FISA, 2002 DVD
FISA, 2004 DVD

Leonardo Pettinari

5'11" 181 cm 157 lb. 71 kg

Elia Luini

6'0" 184 cm 157 lb. 71kg
Champions 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003

Robert Sycz

6'0" 183 cm 165 lb. 75 kg

Thomasz Kucharski

5'11" 181 cm 169 lb. 72 kg
Champions 1997, 1998, 2000, 2004

They tended to understroke their Italian counterparts by two beats down the course,

⁴²⁶⁵ Jeff Moag, *The Italian Job*, *Rowing News*, May, 2004, p. 58

⁴²⁶⁶ Topolski, *2004 FISA DVD*

⁴²⁶⁷ Terhaar, personal conversation, 2004

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rowing 35½ to their 37½ in 2000 and 38 to their 40 in fast conditions in 2002.

By contrast, the Italians relied on piston-like leg drive at the beginning of the pullthrough, with the arms unstrained and the backs only “bracing” the legs.

Like the Abbagnales, Pettinari and Luini made every effort to eliminate any force discontinuity after their initial leg explosion. The second half of the drive continued with the legs, backs and arms working together with the aggressiveness of the first half, the very last part being handled by the arms alone in a ferryman’s finish. This was the “two-part” drive that Savarino has described in the previous chapter.

American coach **Tom Terhaar**: “Italians are very aggressive at the catch, and I think they’re always chasing it, but that’s not the whole story. If you watch them row steady at anything below race cadence, you’ll see their rhythm. You’ll see the incredible amount of feel, even though at full pressure it doesn’t look like it.

“It’s definitely leg oriented. It’s leg drive, but it’s not ‘bang!’ and that’s it. There is real effort to pull through.”⁴²⁶⁸

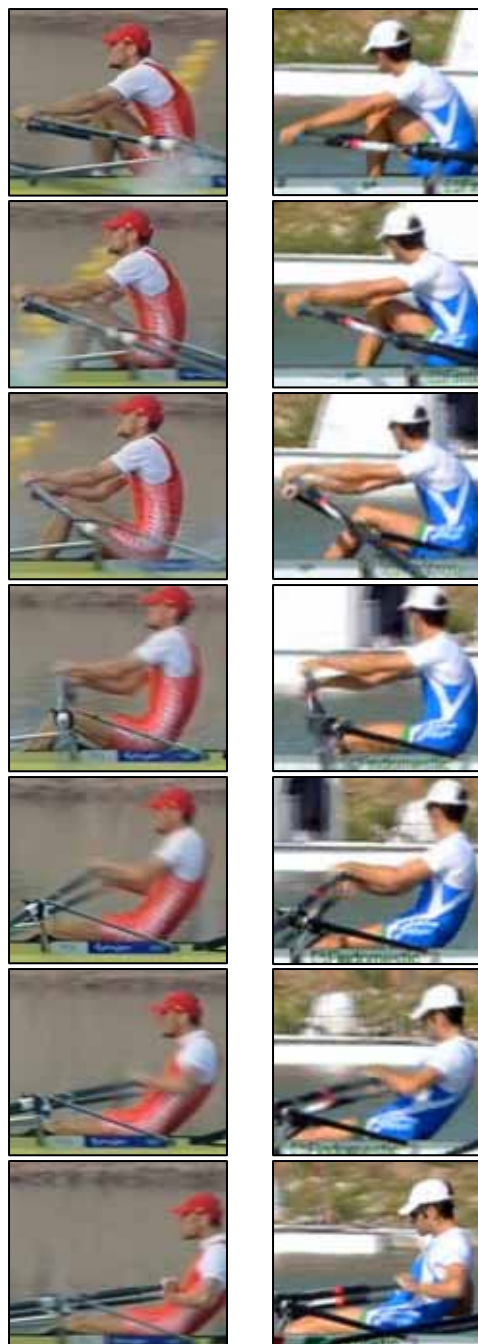
Visually, the Italians appeared to be working *very* hard, and that impression was accentuated by the presence of the Poles, who looked almost languorous by comparison.

However, there were many other superficial similarities between the two crews. At the entry, the Poles achieved verticality with their shins and compressed their upper bodies +25° onto their thighs. The Italians used a bit less leg compression and just a bit more body angle, but otherwise posture was similar.

In Photos 1 through 3 on this page,⁴²⁶⁹ note the explosive *Kernschlag* Italian leg

⁴²⁶⁸ Terhaar, personal conversation, 2004

⁴²⁶⁹ Note that in the accompanying photos, the Polish sculler is milliseconds ahead of the Italian.



FISA, 2000 Video

FISA, 2002 DVD

Tomas Kucharski (left)
0°, +25° to -35°, 0-10, 0-10, 0-10
Concurrent *Schubschlag*
Leonardo Pettinari (right)
-5°, +30° to -35°, 0-6, 3-9, 3-10
Sequential *Kernschlag*

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FISA, 2000 Video

Poland and Italy side by side.

In first photo, both boats were riding normally.

In second photo, Poland with buried bow.

In third photo, Italy with buried bow.

(Note the disappearing black line below the words "Che storia. . .!" on the Italian hull.)

drive compared to the Polish leg-back-arm *Schubschlag* concurrency.

From 4 to 6, Pettinari's back moved through an arc of 45° , almost twice as much as the 25° of movement of Kucharski's back during the same period. This was because the Italian back was working more in

isolation, the leg motion already having been largely completed, while the Polish legs, back and arms were still working off of one another.

At the finish, the Polish crew would accelerate to the last centimeter of the pullthrough while the Italians employed the ferryman's finish.

The maximum layback angles of both crews were virtually identical.

Criticizing the Poles

Although the Polish crew was one of the most polished and elegant in the world, every single year it would be described in harsh terms by BBC/FISA commentator **Daniel Topolski** for the way its shell bounced down into the water at the finish of each pullthrough, and he laid the blame on their unorthodox long layback.

Topolski: "I was not so much harsh on them. It was just the comparison. It was more to define the difference between the two boats, and for an audience, it's always kind of interesting to try to pick out the differences in technique to try and show how those things work.

"The Poles had a very different way of rowing. They had a very definite bounce to their boat. They had a rhythm that worked for them, but their finish pushed the bow of their boat down and made the boat bounce quite a lot."⁴²⁷⁰

There is indeed no doubt that the Poles did bury their boat at the finish. Note how the waterline crept up the hull of their Empacher shell between Photos 1 and 2 on this page as Polish bow-man Kucharski layed back.

Yet at -35° , the Italians' layback was virtually the same as the Poles, and as can be seen by comparing Photo 2 with Photo 3, when Italian bow-man Luini had layed back

⁴²⁷⁰ Topolski, personal conversation, 2008

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and was returning to vertical with his ferryman's finish.

Interestingly, the waterline crept up the hull of their Filippi shell just as far as it had for their rivals.

Topolski: "If you just look at the end of the stroke as they [release], they're probably about the same, but just before the end of the stroke, as they finish the stroke, there's a little dip down. That has an effect."⁴²⁷¹

Such subtlety is beyond the sensitivity of photo illustrations in a book, perhaps even beyond the detail captured on a FISA DVD.

Topolski: "The Italians sat very low in the boat, drove the legs. It was very horizontal, and they finished off the stroke after they'd driven the legs. There was no lift of the bodies at all."⁴²⁷²

Interestingly, the photo comparison of Kucharski and Pettinari earlier in this chapter seems to indicate that the vertical distance the heads of these two athletes rose and fell during the pullthrough was nearly identical.

Topolski: "The run of the Italian boat was much more consistent. Certainly, they finished off their stroke, so at the very end of the stroke there was a little bit of diving, but there's not so much of a bounce. If you measure the height of the hull off the water, you'll see that it goes down and then comes up again as they recover."⁴²⁷³

The technical and stylistic differences between these two great boats are clearly visible to the naked eye, but the import of these differences is as elusive as smoke. I encourage the readers to review the FISA videos for themselves and make up their own minds.

But why did Daniel Topolski repeatedly single out the Italian double for praise and the Polish double for disparagement?

Daniel Topolski, a strong proponent of Modern Orthodoxy, was showing a natural preference for a crew with which he agreed, along with characteristic intolerance for any crew which did not row Modern Orthodox Technique.

⁴²⁷¹ Topolski, personal conversation, 2008

⁴²⁷² T Topolski, personal conversation, 2008

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137. Modern Orthodoxy versus GDR in Italy

De Capua Changes Direction

In 2005, the winds of change were blowing in Piediluco, and they were blowing away from *Kernschlag* back to *Schubschlag*.

Giuseppe de Capua was appointed to replace Giuseppe La Mura as Technical Director of the Italian Rowing Federation. He had also worked with Thor Nilsen at Piediluco, and had been head coach for the senior team, sweep and scull, from 1980 to 1992.

“I was Thor’s right hand man for ten years.”⁴²⁷⁴

In accepting the job, “Beppe” announced that he intended to move away from the rowing technique that Luini and Pettinari rowed. His comments are very revealing.

www.fisa.org: “I’m introducing a different rowing technique,’ says **de Capua**. ‘I put a lot of effort into the economy of movement of the stroke. I want it to be elastic, to have cooperation between the body, the boat and the oars. To do this, it means developing a lot of feeling of your body and feeling the oars as an extension of the hands.

“‘It’s a relaxed movement, but you still pull hard, you are still aggressive.’

“The Italian ‘technique’ has been known for its two-part drive, but de Capua wants to work towards a more fluid movement. ‘I want to achieve the right pressure from catch to finish and do this with harmony.

“‘It’s kind of a dance. You have to dance on the foot stretcher.

“‘You have to let the boat float.’

“De Capua was also influenced technically by reading **Steve Fairbairn**, the very influential British coach of the early 1900s (‘The gliding recovery, the fluent catch’).”⁴²⁷⁵

De Capua’s results in his first year in the job were impressive. At the 2005 World Under-23 Championships, “Italy won medals in eight of the 19 events, and four of them were Gold. Italy finished third overall in the Rowing World Cup points table, a result that included the men’s eight winning for the first time in a number of years.”⁴²⁷⁶

In the 2005 Senior World Championships in Gifu, Japan, Italian men medaled in eight of fourteen events, two Gold, four Silver and two Bronze.

In 2005, the revamped Athens Bronze-Medal-winning Italian lightweight coxless-four was a good representative of de Capua’s technique changes.

After the Pettinari and Luini double had broken up the previous year,⁴²⁷⁷ Luini joined the 2005 lightweight four.

⁴²⁷⁵ *The New Italian Stroke*, www.fisa.org, August 1, 2005

⁴²⁷⁶ *The New Italian Stroke*, www.fisa.org, August 1, 2005

⁴²⁷⁷ In 2005, Pettinari teamed up with 1998 and 2003 World Lightweight Singles Champion **Stefano Basalini**. They came in fourth, right behind third-place Robert Sycz and his new partner, **Pawel Randa**.

⁴²⁷⁴ De Capua, qtd. by www.fisa.org

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FISA, 2005 DVD

Italian Lightweight Men's Coxless-Four

3 Elia Luini, 2 Salvatore di Somma

2005 World Bronze Medal, Gifu

Very strong surge to send at finish.

Very physical, not elegant.

+5°, +30° to -30°, 0-6, 2-10, 5-10

Modern Orthodox Technique

Emphasis on legs remained. Ferryman's finish almost eliminated.

Kernschlag replaced by *Schubschlag*.

Prior to de Capua's appointment, force application had been marked by explosive legs followed by very aggressive back swing to a ferryman's finish. In the 2005 version, body mechanics had hardly changed. Legs still dominated early, and back swing strongly completed the pullthrough, but the focus had been moved to uninterrupted acceleration from the entry to the finish.

This is a return to the de Capua Technique of **Davide Tizzano**.

In their final in Gifu and after a relatively slow start, the Italian lightweight coxless-four came on strong in the second 1,000 and when the finish line came, they

were moving fast only two-thirds of a length down on the winning French four.

Interestingly, the Silver Medal went to a four from **Ireland** and will be discussed later in a chapter examining their coach, former GDR Champion **Harald Jährling**,⁴²⁷⁸ who has become a strong proponent of Modern Orthodoxy.

The second-place Irish four clearly displayed Thor's preferred legs, body, arms sequential motion. It was so extreme that their seats were kicked out from under them by the initial leg drive.

⁴²⁷⁸ See p. xxx ff

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What caught the eye most with the Irish, however, was the strength of their surge to the release. The pullthrough was made up of the initial horizontal leg drive followed by the back swing to the finish. There was a distinct discontinuity between the two phases of the pullthrough, but this was not *Kernschlag*. Force application was focused on building boat speed to the finish rather than simply on an explosive catch and then a second effort to the finish.

Incidentally, the 2005 World Championship Gold Medal in the men's lightweight four was won by **France** ticking the boat along *Schubschlag* at 39 using +15-20° to -15° back swing and 0-6, 0-10, 5-10 motion, with less effort spent sending the boat at the finish and more on transitioning seamlessly to the next stroke.

The Orthodoxy of Thor Nilsen

After teaching GDR Technique early in his career, Thor Nilsen had become a convert to Modern Orthodoxy, but he fully embraces it today in its *Schubschlag* version. When asked what had prompted his personal evolution from the technique of the Hansen brothers in the '70s to that of the Irish team in the '00s, Thor replied, "I think

that it's common sense. It is the natural way."⁴²⁷⁹

And in the hands of the master, it obviously works. In his career, Thor Nilsen's crews have won eight Olympic and more than thirty World Championship Gold Medals, many of them after his conversion to Modern Orthodoxy.

Nilsen's greatest and most lasting contribution to rowing history has been in spreading the gospel of rowing around the world. "I don't look at people as a nationality."⁴²⁸⁰

FISA: "He insists on coaching athletes, not countries. Officially he counts the number of nations that he is involved with as seven. Unofficially, it is much more extensive, with the Nilsen influence felt in most South American nations, chunks of Europe, countries in the former USSR and Asia."⁴²⁸¹

The technique he continues to spread is Modern Orthodoxy.

⁴²⁷⁹ Nilsen, personal conversation, 2005

⁴²⁸⁰ www.fisa.org

⁴²⁸¹ www.fisa.org