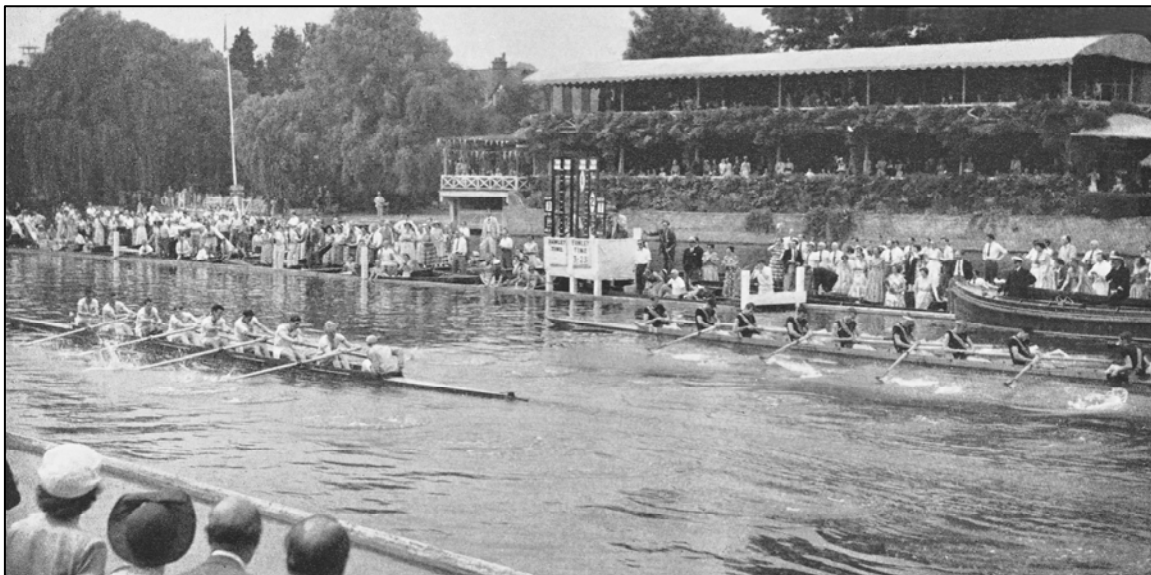


INTERNATIONAL ROWING TURNS PROFESSIONAL

72. Britain Confronts Internationalism

Colin Porter – Moto Guzzi – Barn Cottage



Porter, *Rowing to Win*

1953 Thames Challenge Cup Semi-Final
RAF Benson defeats Princeton University Lightweights, one-half length

Forgotten Revolutionary

In the 1950s, nonconformist British thinker and rower **Colin Porter**, 6'2" 189 cm 181 lb. 82 kg, developed an alternate explanation for the decline of British rowing at mid-century: lack of training.

Porter's good friend and teammate, **Christopher Davidge**:²¹⁸⁴ "Mr. Porter has been a highly controversial figure in the field of British rowing. In certain circles he has been accused of exerting a deleterious influence by introducing a pseudo-American

style and by preaching a gospel of fanatical fitness to the exclusion of all technique."²¹⁸⁵

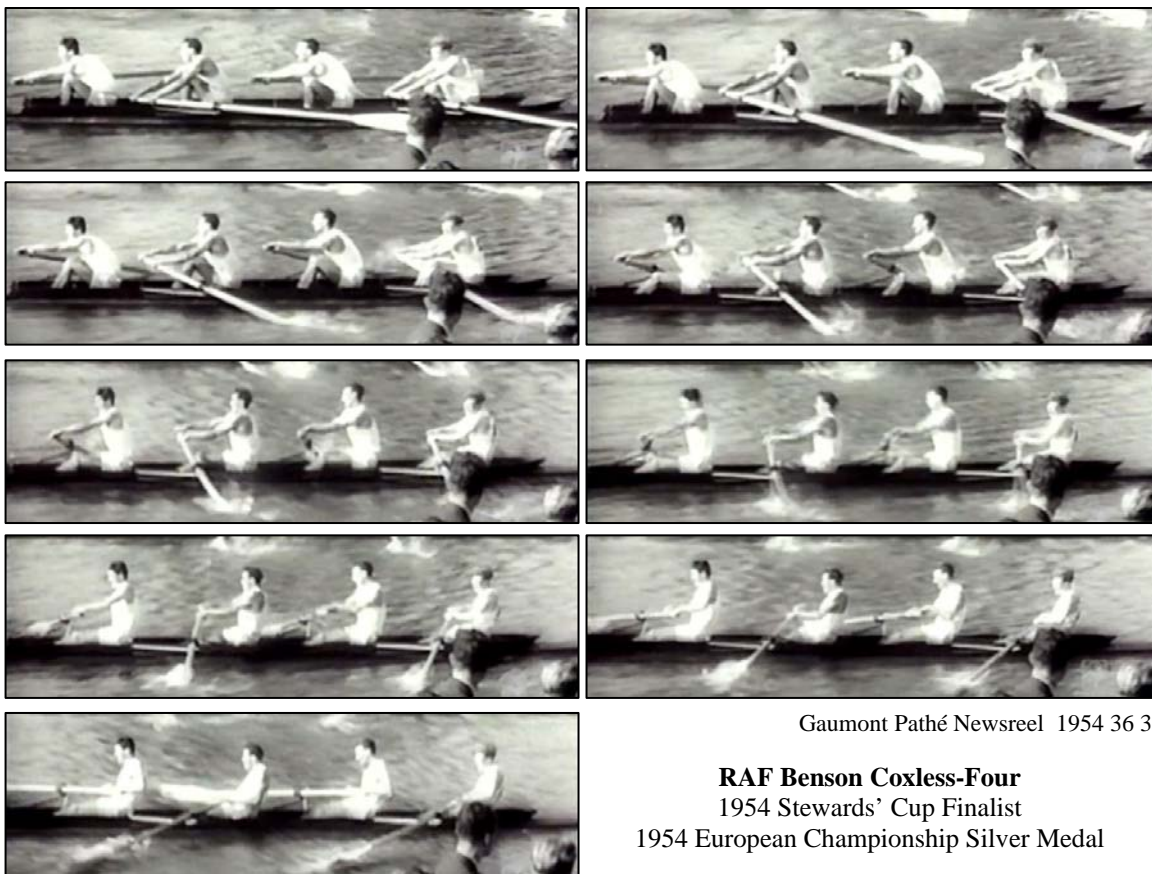
Davidge was not exaggerating.

Historian **John Hall-Craggs**: "The great thing about Colin Porter is that, in effect, he ended the impact of the war, which had interrupted the training regime that there had been in the '30s. Partly it was that most crews were only allowed to go out three times a week, and secondly they had no food. It was Colin Porter who broke through and reestablished, albeit at a higher level, that element of training.

²¹⁸⁴ Pronounced with a long á, as in "David."

²¹⁸⁵ Davidge, foreword to Porter, *Rowing to Win*, p. 13

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Gaumont Pathé Newsreel 1954 36 3

RAF Benson Coxless-Four
1954 Stewards' Cup Finalist
1954 European Championship Silver Medal

Stroke **Mike Beresford** 6'0" 183 cm 165 lb. 75 kg, 3 **Bill Rand**,
2 **Colin Porter** 6'2" 188 cm 181 lb. 82 kg, Bow **Gavin Sorrell**
0°, +35° to -20°, 0-10, 0-10, 0-10, Concurrent *Schubschlag*, ferryman's finish
Similarities to American 3rd Generation Conibear Stroke.

"However, it was training at the expense of quality of oarsmanship. He was a *hideous* looking oar, but he was tough. He made his crews really sharp."²¹⁸⁶

Take a look at the photos on this page, and judge for yourself.

Colin Porter had learned to row at King's School, Canterbury and later was captain of boats and stroked the 1st VIII at London University. Upon completing his studies, Porter was recruited to spend his years of mandatory national service at the Royal Air Force Base at Benson, situated

near the River Thames between Henley and Oxford. **RAF Benson** was the home of the Royal Air Force rowing squad.

Porter: "I took over as officer in charge of rowing and found a small group of about ten oarsmen, none of whom had come from elite rowing backgrounds but all of whom loved their rowing enough to take the initiative to be posted to Benson while they were doing their national service."²¹⁸⁷

With rowing as their "job" for at least two years, Porter and his RAF Benson teammates became Britain's first modern professional oarsmen and took a serious

²¹⁸⁶ Hall-Craggs, personal conversation, 2008

²¹⁸⁷ Porter, *Servant*, p. 18

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look at the possibilities their sport afforded them.

“One thing that was obvious to us and to every other oarsman worldwide was the absolute domination of the Olympic eight-oared event by crews from the United States. [They] were all university crews, and they rowed a style that was different from everyone else, with little body swing [compared to English Orthodox] and very long slide movement. The oarsmen were all very tall but appeared relatively unskillful. However, these crews were extremely fit with strong finishing spurts.

“Our little RAF rowing squad at Benson resolved to learn as much as we could about American rowing. We wrote Harvard Coach **Tom Bolles** and asked if he could give us any advice. He generously sent us a 16-mm film, and we watched it over and over.

“We also contacted two American students at Oxford, one who had rowed for Yale and one who had coxed at the U.S. Naval Academy. They both came and talked to us and even provided coaching occasionally.

“It became clear to us that the great difference between the successful United States college crews and all the British crews was not so much the way they rowed as the way they trained.

“British rowing traditionally concentrated on good rowing form. As crews became tired, form deteriorated, so a crew was rested and the coach tried again. Many miles were covered at a slow rate of striking, concentrating on technique. Only in the final stages before a race was racing rhythm undertaken. We concluded that most [British] crews did not get really fit.

“The Americans had a ruthless system for producing the fastest eights in the world. At one university at least, on enrollment day freshmen had to pass through a doorway

6’3” high.²¹⁸⁸ Any student who had to duck was grabbed as soon as he passed through and persuaded to join the rowing squad.

“Discipline was intense. Instead of many hours learning the finer points of technique at a slow pace, after basic instruction crews were sent off at a relatively high rate and continually in a state close to exhaustion.

“We started what was, for Britain, a quite revolutionary training system. We trained in solitary splendor on our remote stretch of river. We were constantly in a state of exhaustion. The aim was never to go to bed until each one of us was completely exhausted.”²¹⁸⁹

1953

Positive results came in just over a year. After reaching only the semifinals of the Wyfold Cup for coxless-fours in the weeks after his arrival at Benson in 1952, the RAF squad won both the 1953 Wyfold and Thames Cups at Henley, defeating the Princeton Lightweights in the Thames semifinals, the first time in twenty years that the fastest American entrant in that event had been defeated.

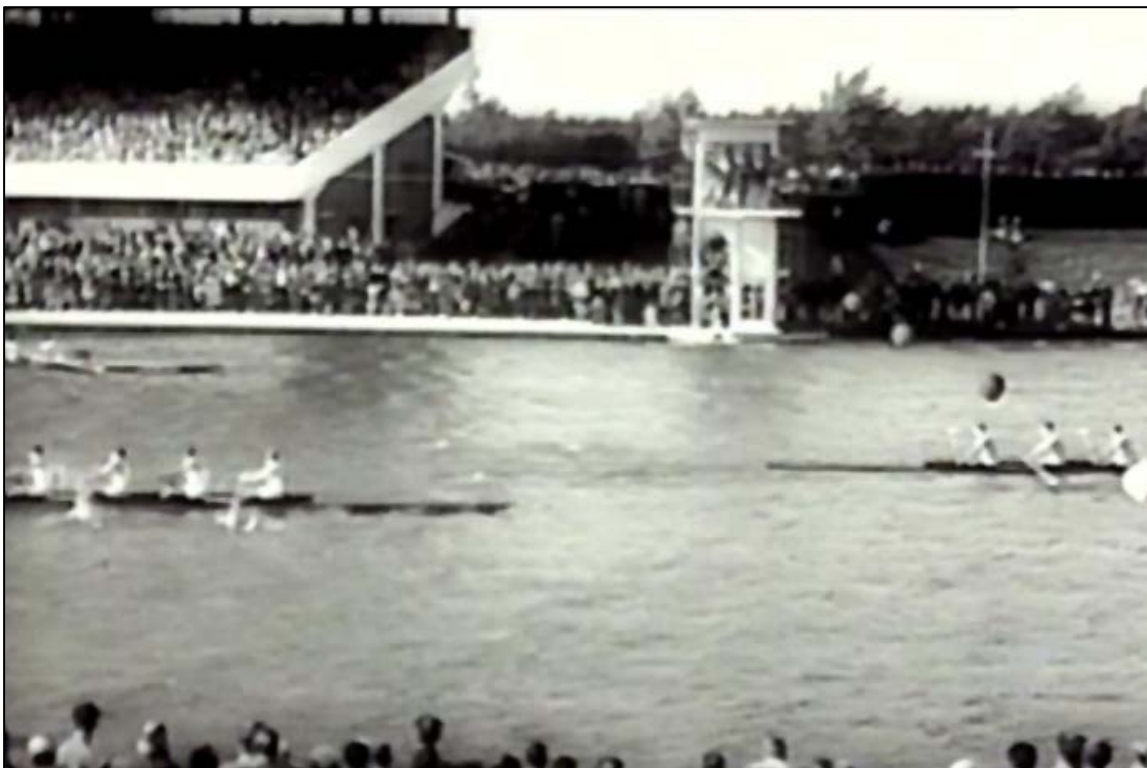
The Wyfold-winning RAF four was then selected to represent Britain at the 1953 European Championships in Copenhagen. They beat the Yugoslav 1952 Olympic Champion coxless-four in winning their qualifying heat, and in the final they won the Bronze Medal behind Denmark and Norway.

1954

²¹⁸⁸ In truth, something like this took place at virtually every rowing school in the United States during the entire 20th Century.

²¹⁸⁹ Porter, *Servant*, pp. 20-1

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Gaumont Pathé Newsreel 1954 36 3

1954 European Championships, Bosbaan
Coxless-Four: 1 **ITA**, 2 **GBR** (foreground), 3 **SUI**

The RAF squad began 1954 by winning the Head of the River²¹⁹⁰ by six seconds over a field of two-hundred thirty-nine other crews. **Colin Porter**, 6'2" 181 lb., **Gavin Sorrell**, **Bill Rand** and **John Michael "Mike" Beresford**, 6'0" 183 cm 165 lb. 75 kg, nephew of the younger Jack Beresford, then entered the Stewards' Cup, the top race at Henley for coxless-fours.

Porter: "We beat the Danish crew in the semi-final, sweet revenge after our loss to them in Copenhagen the year before, but lost to an exceptional Russian crew in the final, giving away more than a stone²¹⁹¹ a man into a fairly stiff headwind.

²¹⁹⁰ a head-style race against the clock held in March over the four-mile Oxford-Cambridge course on the Thames River in London.

²¹⁹¹ 1 stone = 14 lb.

"[After Henley,] we were selected for the European Championships in Amsterdam, while the Russian crew that had beaten us at Henley took on a cox and romped home to win the Gold Medal in that event. We had some excellent racing and ended up with the Silver Medal, losing to a very experienced Italian crew in the final."²¹⁹²

Porter and his mates could see the future of international rowing. As paid members of the armed forces, the RAF crew was indirectly state sponsored. The Soviets were rowing's first truly well-funded full-time professional national team. Italian sport was supported by a national lottery, and the Italian four was sponsored by the **Moto Guzzi** motorcycle factory.

²¹⁹² Porter, *Servant*, pp. 34-5

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Gaumont Pathé Newsreel 1954 36 3

1954 Cannottieri Moto Guzzi Coxless- Four

European Champions, Bosbaan

Bow **Giuseppe Moioli**, 2 **Giovanni Zuchi**, 3 **Francesco Lazzari**, Stroke **Attilio Cantoni**

Hall-Craggs: “There was a lot of ill-feeling about Moto Guzzi when they first came over in the ‘30s in that they were essentially a company crew.”²¹⁹³

Porter: “Up to that time, most countries held trials and selected the best crew to represent them. The standard of the winning club was obviously limited by its membership, and that in turn was limited by those who could afford to row and could spare the time. Men who might be called on to work overtime, often at short notice, were clearly at a disadvantage in crew rowing.”²¹⁹⁴

²¹⁹³ Hall-Craggs, personal conversation, 2008

²¹⁹⁴ Porter, *Servant*, p. 42

1955

At the end of his national service, Colin Porter moved to London and joined **Thames Rowing Club**. He was a member of the 1955 Thames first eight that won the Head of the River but was dissatisfied with the club’s traditional British training regimen with emphasis on technique over hard work.

The eight lost in the first round of the Grand to the University of Pennsylvania, the eventual winners,²¹⁹⁵ and did not make the final at the European Championships in Ghent.

²¹⁹⁵ See p. xxx

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1956

Porter: “The state of British rowing in the mid-‘50s was dismal. I concluded that no one had any chance of producing an eight of international standard for the 1956 Melbourne Games, but what could I do? I thought we might be able to produce a coxless-four with a chance of reaching the Olympic final.”²¹⁹⁶

So Porter approached **Maurice Legg** and **Alistair Davidson** from his 1955 Thames eight and **Mike Beresford**, stroke of his 1954 European Silver Medal four, and they began to train on their own at Thames RC. For the Head of the River in March, they gathered four former RAF oarsmen and threw together an eight at the last minute. They entered as the Thames Rowing Club Third Eight. They won the race by ten seconds and finished no less than twenty-five seconds ahead of the club’s official First Eight.²¹⁹⁷

The British rowing establishment in general and Thames Rowing Club in particular were *not* amused. Working outside the club’s organized programs and gathering talent from the four corners of the country was unprecedented and, to their thinking, undermined the system they believed in.

Porter’s four completed their regular season undefeated, winning the Stewards’ Cup final by more than three lengths. Then, even though no British eight had made the final of the Grand, the British selectors decided to send an eight but no coxless-four to the 1956 European Championships in Bled and to the 1956 Olympics in Australia. A composite eight was chosen, but not one member of Porter’s four was selected. The resulting boat failed to move past the *repêchages* in either Bled or Melbourne.

At the European Championships, “the coxless-four was won by our old adversaries from **Cannottieri Moto Guzzi**, Italy, but of course there was no entry from Britain. They could hardly have sent any four other than us, and it was obvious that Thames Club officials were not supporting our selection in spite of our winning the Stewards’ Cup for the club at Henley.

“I record without further comment that Thames Rowing Club was not going to win any events at Henley in the next forty years.”²¹⁹⁸

After the disappointment of 1956, Colin Porter refrained from rowing himself in 1957 and coached London’s previously underperforming **National Provincial Bank Rowing Club** to a win in the Wyfold fours and a mere one-length loss in the finals of the Thames Cup. The Wyfold winners, essentially a lightweight crew averaging less than 155 pounds, also made the finals of the European Championships in Duisburg.

Barn Cottage Boat Club

Ready to resume training after his recuperative year off, Porter moved his single to **Molesey Boat Club** in London where he sculled alongside **Mike Beresford**. Both started spending weekends in the extra bedrooms out back of **Barn Cottage**, a small Edwardian villa on Remenham Lane across the bridge from the town of Henley owned by an old oarsman named **Teddy Selwyn**.²¹⁹⁹ Social gatherings there tended to include recreational rows on the Thames out of Leander Club, with many old Blues and ex-RAF Benson oarsmen in attendance.

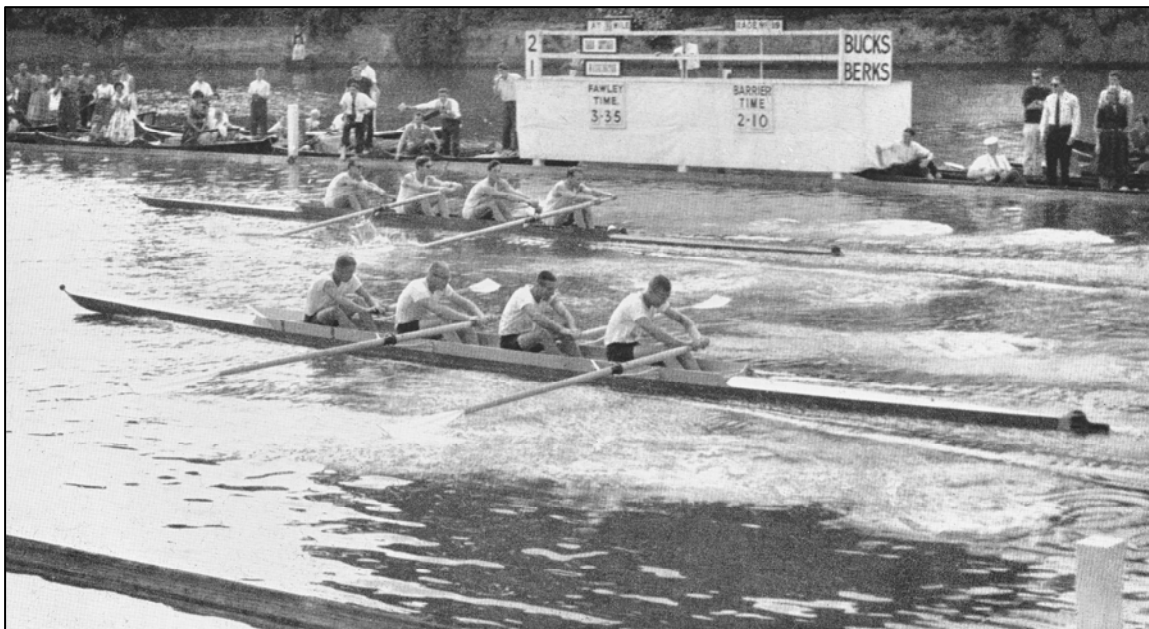
²¹⁹⁸ Porter, *Servant*, p. 51

²¹⁹⁹ “I suppose the oarsmen piled into the old cricket pavilion at the back. The property is now owned by the HRR as Teddy is ancient and has run out of money, so they bought it from him, and he stays on there.” – Diana Cook, Richard Way Booksellers, Henley, 2008

²¹⁹⁶ Porter, *Servant*, p. 49

²¹⁹⁷ Porter, *Servant*, p. 50

INTERNATIONAL ROWING TURNS PROFESSIONAL



Porter, *Rowing to Win*

1958 Stewards' Cup Semi-Final

Barn Cottage Boat Club defeats **University of Washington Jayvee**, one length

Barn Cottage: Bow **Mike Beresford** 6'0" 183 cm 165 lb. 75 kg, 2 **John Vigurs** 6'4" 193 cm,
3 **Simon Crosse** 6'5" 196 cm, Stroke **Colin Porter** 6'2" 188 cm 181 lb. 82 kg

Soon the idea was hatched to boat composite crews of the best oarsmen available, regardless of college or club affiliation, under the name **Barn Cottage Boat Club**.

1958

A Barn Cottage composite eight comprised of Australian sculler **Stuart Mackenzie**,²²⁰⁰ the 1957 European Singles Champion, **Christopher Davidge** and **David Leadley**, the 1957 European Pair Champions, **Alistair Davidson**, **Mike Beresford** and **Colin Porter** from the undefeated 1956 Stewards' Cup four and two more members of the old RAF Benson squad won the 1958 Head of the River by

eight seconds. "It was the first of what was to be five successive wins."²²⁰¹

For the spring, Porter and Beresford teamed with 6'5" **John Vigurs** and 6'4" **Simon Crosse** to form a potent Barn Cottage four. They defeated the University of Washington in the semis and Porter's old National Provisional Bank crew in the finals of the Stewards' Cup.

In Cardiff, Wales, in the finals of the 1958 Commonwealth Games coxed-four, they won Gold over a Canadian shell coached by Frank Read and made up of members of their 1956 Olympic Champion coxless-four and Olympic Silver Medal eight. At the same regatta, the National Provincial Bank four won the Commonwealth coxless-four title.

During 1958, Porter also took time to write his seminal book, *Rowing to Win*.

²²⁰⁰ See p. xxx

²²⁰¹ Porter, *Servant*, p. 63

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1960

Barn Cottage members gathered a formidable group to train for the Rome Olympics. Rowing as **Molesey Boat Club**, they took the Grand Challenge Cup over a very strong Oxford University crew coached by 1932 double-Olympic Gold Medalist **Jumbo Edwards**.²²⁰² For the Games, Oxford was selected for the eight while the Barn Cottage eight became the two British fours.

The coxless four of bow **Mike Beresford**, 6'0" 183 cm 165 lb. 75 kg, 2 **Colin Porter**, 6'2" 189 cm 181 lb. 82 kg, 3 **John Vigurs**, 6'5" 198 cm 194 lb. 88 kg, and stroke **Christopher Davidge**, 6'0" 183 cm 174 lb. 79 kg, set an Olympic record in a rough tailwind in their qualifying heat on Lago Albano. Gushed *The Times* of London: "It is as if the British lion has woken up at last, lashed its tail and sprung to life.

"Hungary led at 500 metres with Britain second. At 1,000 metres Hungary still led, but the United States were ahead of Britain. Hungary were ahead at 1,500 metres, but Britain, striking 40, put on the pressure, passed first the United States, then Hungary.

"Just when one thought all was well, the crew hit a rough patch, faltered badly, recovered magnificently, and broke all ascertainable records when they won. It was an exhibition of self-discipline and courage which should put new heart into every British crew in the Games."^{2203, 2204}

Porter: "The Americans won their repêchage, and we met them again in the final.

"In our coxless boat, Beresford steered from the bow seat. One of the clogs into which his feet were strapped swiveled on the heel so that moving the toe from side to side manipulated the rudder through wires. However, experienced crews try to avoid using the rudder as obviously it takes some of the run off the boat.

"Beresford and I, rowing bow and 2, were long accustomed to adjusting the pressure exerted on the oars to avoid using the rudder on straight courses. We had covered barely a quarter of the course when I noticed the boat was coming close to the bow-side lane marker buoys. I eased up for a couple of strokes to bring the boat back towards the middle of the lane, but as soon as I applied full power again, we veered back towards the buoys.

"The rest of the race was very frustrating for me, as I could not afford to row flat out for fear of bringing the boat into the buoys. Afterwards, we found out that Beresford had had a recurrence of the gastroenteritis which had crippled our crew in Poland two years earlier. This had cropped up in the three days between the heat and the final and obviously had weakened him."²²⁰⁵

Unfortunately for the Barn Cottage four, three other crews, **Cannottieri Moto Guzzi** of Italy, the **Soviet Union National Squad** and **Lake Washington Rowing Club** from the United States, all composite crews manned by athletes far bigger and stronger than the British, quickly separated themselves from the rest of the field in the second 500 meters of the Olympic final. After leading at 500, the British four quickly faded to fifth and stayed there for the balance of the race.

²²⁰² See pp. 546-8 xxx

²²⁰³ World Record by British Coxless Four, *The Times*, September 1, 1960

²²⁰⁴ For the American perspective on that heat, see p. xxx.

²²⁰⁵ Porter, from a section of *A Very Public Servant* removed by the publisher during the editing process, personal correspondence, 2007

INTERNATIONAL ROWING TURNS PROFESSIONAL



Porter, *Rowing to Win*

Colin Porter

Porter: “The United States crew we had beaten in the first heat won the Gold Medal. Our disappointment was immense, but perhaps all too common for athletes at this level of competition. At least Davidge and Vigurs had had the satisfaction of being fully rowed out. I had finished with something in hand, no way to be at the end of an Olympic final. No other event in my sporting life has caused me more misery than this. I had put so much time and effort into winning an Olympic Medal that defeat was hard to bear.”²²⁰⁶

Retirement

Porter injured himself in 1961 and so occupied himself by coaching the Barn Cottage eight. They lost the Grand to

²²⁰⁶ Porter, from a section of *A Very Public Servant* removed by the publisher during the editing process, personal correspondence, 2007

Leander and failed to place at the European Championships.

The following year with Colin back in the boat, it was still Barn Cottage leading Britain, but they were falling further behind their international competition as the rest of the world relied more and more on mature athletes training full time well into their 20s while supported by military, state or corporate sponsors.

Porter: “In retrospect, it was the old story: international competition getting stronger and stronger, Britain struggling with outmoded attitudes to training, no professional coaching and little financial support.”²²⁰⁷

The Barn Cottage eight failed to make the final at the 1962 World Championships in Luzern and came in third in the '62 Commonwealth Games in Perth. In his last race before retirement, Colin Porter and half the Barn Cottage eight won Commonwealth Bronze in the coxed-four.

Post Mortem

Colin Porter had failed to win a European, World or Olympic Gold Medal, and so his dangerously open mind and revolutionary attitude toward selection and training could be ignored, discounted and eventually forgotten by the British establishment.

Great Britain produced a superb Silver Medal coxless-four for the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, but it would be another decade before foreign coaches would come to Britain during the coming Age of Enlightenment and help their adopted country begin to loosen its grip on the “outmoded attitudes” that had so frustrated Colin Porter.

²²⁰⁷ Porter, *Servant*, p. 79