

From a South African perspective one of the most endearing moments at the Olympic Games in London was surely when Bridgitte Hartley received her bronze medal in the sprint canoeing.

Pictures that were taken during the medal ceremony, clearly show the tears rolling down Hartley's cheeks when she received her medal.

Those tears were certainly justified. It took nearly eight years of hard work, accompanied by many sacrifices and disappointments for Hartley, to at long last, earn her place on the Olympic podium.

"I have to admit that I still find it difficult to explain my feelings and at times everything still feels somewhat unreal.

"What I can honestly say, is that it was the best day of my life. I was at the same time happy, sad, joyful, excited and speechless. I experienced every possible emotion while I was standing on the podium, watching the South African flag being hoisted next to the flag of Hungary, the top nation in sprint canoeing", is how Hartley remembers her moment on the podium.

Hartley, who finished in a time of 1:52.923 seconds in the women's kayak single (K1) 500m race, won the bronze medal.

The gold medal went to Danuta Kozak of Hungary, who finished in 1:51.456. She was followed, a second later, by the Ukrainian Inna Osypenko-Radomska in 1:52.685.

When did you realize that you had won a medal?

"I only realized that I had won a medal after I had crossed the line at the end of the race. It was definitely the hardest race of my life.

"I can honestly say that I have never suffered so much pain as during the Olympic final. The pain began from the moment the race started. I had to keep telling myself not to worry about what the other girls were doing, but just to keep on racing my own race."

Hartley actually made South African Olympic history, because she was the first canoeist to win a medal for South Africa. Athletics, swimming, tennis, shooting, rowing, boxing and cycling are the only other sports in which South Africa ever won medals.

What was the hardest practice

sessions you had to do in the build-up to London?

"It was when we had to do two hard interval sessions, adding up to 12-14km, of sprint running (5x500m) as well as pull-ups and push-ups.

"We also did 2km time trials in the morning, followed by sprint running in the afternoon, as well as pull-ups, and push-ups.

"I also did yoga or pilates as an extra session every other day."

The million dollar question is whether she is prepared to sacrifice another four years of her life to see whether she can represent South Africa at the 2016 Games in Brazil.

Hartley said, without hesitation, that she accepts the challenge.

"After receiving my medal, I am definitely motivated to go on for another four years.

"I basically need to sit down with my coach, Nandor Almasi, and regroup. Hopefully he will continue to coach me, because he is the only person who has ever coached me."

Although Almasi is Hungarian, he is one of the legends of South African canoeing.

A look at the news archives shows that he has always been prepared to help South African canoeists to prepare for the Games, even at times when he was also involved in coaching in other countries.

What makes him such a good coach?

"Nandor believed in me as an athlete ever since I started paddling for sprints in the 2004 season. His amazing eye for technique has helped tremendously to make me a better paddler.

"What makes him even more special, is that he did not act only as my coach, but he was also a father figure for me who took care of my needs in Hungary and Austria when I was there on my own, without a team, to prepare for the Games.

"He even invited me to spend weekends at his house in Hungary on my free days."

About her plans for the build-up to the next Games, Hartley says she always becomes motivated by small

challenges that she runs into along the way.

"For example, I have not won a medal at a world championship yet. So my next important goal will be to try to do something about that.

"During the past four years I have met many people from other countries who have motivated me and also made me realize how much more fun training can be."

How would you describe yourself?

"I am an optimistic blonde with a flair for sport. I have always been involved in different types of sports at school as well as university."

Believe it or not, but canoeing has not always been Hartley's sporting passion.

Netball, hockey, gymnastics and surfing.... Hartley has done them all with various degrees of success. At school she has achieved provincial colours in gymnastics as well as surfing.

It was her dad, James, who persuaded her to start canoeing.

"He kept nagging me to row with him, but I never had time to do so.

"In 2000 I relented and went with my dad. At first I did not enjoy it at all because I was unable to get going, but once I began to master the different techniques I was hooked."

At first she only competed in the river marathons (Dusi, Fish, etc.).

"The deciding moment occurred while I was studying at Tukkie's and Hein van Rooyen persuaded me to do some training for sprint canoeing with them.

"I immediately loved the challenge, because in sprint canoeing there are no short cuts to success. If you are not prepared to put in the hours and sacrifices, you will never succeed."

When asked if she would compete in the Dusi or Fish marathons again, Hartley replied by saying that the rivers will never go away.

"In fact, I have been asked to do the Fish marathon this year in a charity drive to save the rhino. I am quite excited about this opportunity to do a race with a cause."

tears of joy

Text: Wilhelm de Swardt Image: Bridgitte's own collection

