

Mississauga's Olympic hero ... 20 years later

By IAIN COLPITTS
Staff

Silken Laumann believes there's nothing wrong with challenging conventional wisdom. If she felt differently, the Mississauga native wouldn't have been able to secure her place in

Canadian Olympic lore.

It was 20 years ago that Laumann, now 47, overcame an excruciating leg injury to win rowing bronze in the single

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Paul Briggs

LAUMANN, SILKEN

Rowe, overcomes injury to win bronze

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sculls at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. It's a feat she feels she wouldn't have been able to accomplish if she didn't have the desire to prove doctors wrong when they told her she'd never row again after sustaining a career-threatening injury three months prior.

"I just had a very strong sense of what I could do and a sense that (the doctor) didn't know me," she said with a laugh. "It's a good quality in life to sometimes challenge the status quo."

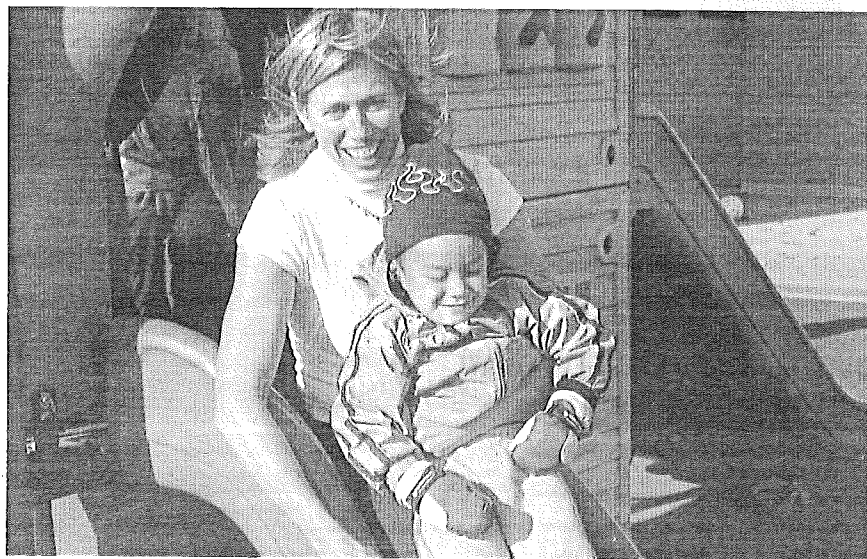
"To a large degree, I was in this hyper-focused pre-Olympic state, where my whole life at that point really revolved around the sport."

On Aug. 2, 1992, Canadians from coast to coast rallied around Laumann's bronze medal triumph considering the seemingly insurmountable obstacle she overcame along the way.

Heading into the '92 Games as the defending world champion and one of the favourites to win gold, Laumann's life and Olympic hopes were put in jeopardy when she was training for a regatta in Germany three months before the Games.

She was involved in a collision with the boat of German pair Colin von Ettinghausen and Peter Hoeltzenbein on May 15, 1992 and questioned whether she'd live or not as she was rushed to hospital.

"My first thought was, 'Am I going to bleed to death?'" Laumann



Silken Laumann serves on the international board of directors for Right to Play, an organization dedicated to promoting sports for children in underdeveloped countries. Here, on one of her visits to Mississauga, she takes time out to visit Plum Tree Park Public School.

recalled. "The flesh was completely folded down from my mid-knee to my ankle so I could see the bone in my leg."

After five surgeries, she was back training on the water three weeks before her first Olympic heat. Laumann's coach at the time, Mike Spracklen, still remembers her determination to get back in the boat.

"Immediately after her accident in Germany, she was in a hospital bed waiting for surgery and talking about how she could carry on

training," said Spracklen, a pillar in Canadian rowing since 1990. "She worked very hard through two weeks of intensive training with me and it seemed nothing could stop her."

Laumann faced stiff competition at the Games. Among the rowers in the final heat were gold medalist Elisabeta Lipa of Romania, a rowing legend with five Olympic golds to her name between 1984 and 2004, silver medalist Annelies Bredael of Belarus and two-time Olympic silver medalist Anne Marden of the

United States.

Laumann had beaten all of them in previous competitions and had her sights set on gold despite her injury.

However, winning bronze was a huge accomplishment, especially considering she had to dig deep in the final 500 metres to surpass Marden for third place.

"I really had this almost superhuman surge of energy that I've never had before and certainly haven't had since," Laumann said. "There wasn't much oxygen going to my brain, so I don't know how clearly I was thinking, but the overwhelming feeling was relief as well as a feeling of disbelief, like, 'Oh my God, I can't believe I just did that.'"

Back home in Mississauga, Fred Loek, her coach at the Don Rowing Club from 1980-88, couldn't have been more proud of her accomplishment.

"She was heading for the podium in Barcelona and we were all confident she could win gold," said Loek, longtime chief photographer at *The Mississauga News*. "To have (the accident) happen was crazy, but then word started getting out that she was coming back and we thought she was nuts. Right away, I thought she'd actually do it, but to actually win a medal was incredible."

In addition to her bronze at the '92 Games, Laumann won bronze with her older sister, Daniele, in the double sculls in 1984 and added a silver in single sculls in 1996.

A winner of the Lou Marsh Award for outstanding athlete in 1992, Laumann

ident of Silken & Co. Productions.

She's also a mother, motivational speaker and writer and serves on the international board of directors for Right to Play, an organization dedicated to promoting sports for children in underdeveloped countries.

Laumann's had plenty to keep her busy the past two decades, but she always reflects positively on that August morning in 1992.

"It was an experience that shaped who I am today," she said. "Having



Fred Loek