

# The long road to victory

John Wood's road to a silver medal started in 1967 when, as a Mississauga Canoe Club member, he started to take a more serious approach to canoeing.

He and Scott Leigh had just won the Canadian Junior championship in the Canadian pairs 1000 metres class. They decided to give the sport everything they had.

They were rewarded with a trip to the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. They returned discouraged by a humiliating experience.

Totally unprepared for international competition, they had left their lane not even knowing it was against the rules. They were disqualified.

They didn't get out of the semi-finals in the 1972 Olympics.

In 1973 Leigh retired from canoeing but Wood was coaxed by Mississauga Canoe Club coach Mac Hickox to stay on.

Competing in a new category, the C-1 500 metres, Wood placed fourth in the world championships. He began to prepare for the 1976 Olympics.

But a lack of funds and a lack of organization within the Canadian Canoe Association brought Wood to near-retirement in 1975. Later in the same year he thought about retiring again.

But when the Canadian Olympic Association came through with aid and decided to keep Hickox as coach on a full-time basis, Wood decided to stay on.

Last week it paid off.

Competing in the qualifying heats Wednesday, Wood placed fourth and went to the repechage, a unique arrangement that allows runners-up to jockey for position and virtually slot themselves in their own semi-final heat.

Wood easily won his repechage heat Wednesday afternoon.

He qualified for his first Olympic final Friday morning by placing second in his heat behind East Germany's Wilfried Stéphan.

Seven hours later he was standing on the Olympic pedestal, receiving his silver medal before 6,000 wild fans.

## Wood's feat not ordinary

John Wood's silver medal winning performance Friday was quite an accomplishment in itself, but even more so when one considers Canada's past performance in canoeing.

For example, the last time a Canadian won a medal in canoeing was in 1952 when the duo of Ken Lane and Donald Haygood won the silver medal at Helsinki in the C-2 10,000 metres.

It was also the seventh medal Canada has won in canoeing in the 52 years the sport has been included in Olympic competition. Ironically, Canada was the country that introduced the sport to the Olympics.

Wood's medal was the only one of two of the 66 medals awarded at the 1976 Olympic Games not won by paddlers from one of the Eastern European communist countries.

All other medals went to paddlers from the U.S.S.R., Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Romania.

Wood was also the first Canadian to make the finals in Canadian singles since 1968.