



Barton Makes Olympic History As U.S. Team Finishes Fourth Overall



Gold Medalists Greg Barton left, and Norman Bellingham, right, on the awards stand in Seoul, receiving congratulations from Sergio Orsi, president of the International Canoe Federation.

In an extraordinary display of strength and endurance, Greg Barton paddled his way into Olympic history as he grabbed two gold medals during the Canoeing competition at the Han River Regatta Course in Seoul, Korea. Barton first defended his title in the K-1, 1,000 meters by edging out Grant Davies of Australia by a mere .005 seconds, and seventy minutes later teamed with Norman Bellingham to again take the gold by a fraction of a second in the K-2, 1,000.

Barton and Bellingham led the U.S. team to a fourth place finish overall behind East Germany, the Soviet Union and Hungary. Seven of eight boats made it to the finals, including all three women's boats and the men's single and double kayaks at both 500 and 1,000 meters. Arkansas native Mike Herbert, a relative newcomer to the sport, just missed a bronze

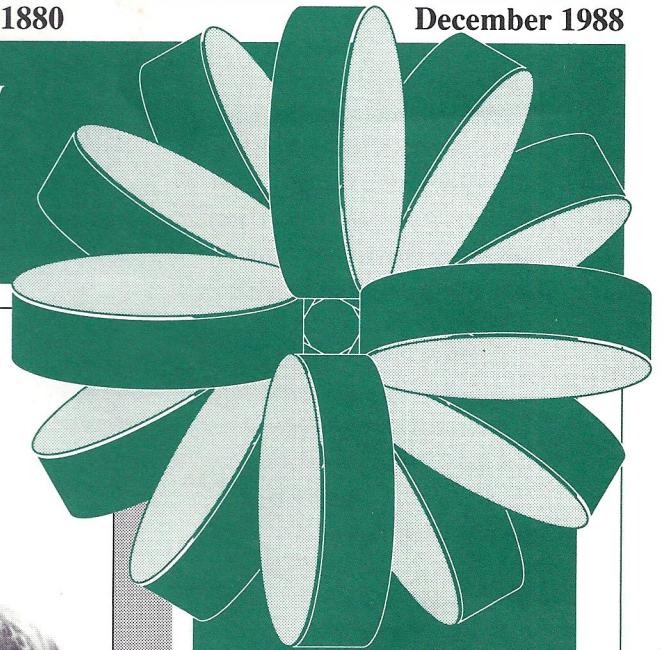
in the men's 500 single while Traci Phillips, a 25-year-old from Honolulu, finished sixth in what was only her third major international competition. But it was Greg "Buck" Barton who turned the pages of the record books.

According to the world, the 28-year-old native of Homer, Michigan was the man to beat in the 1,000 meter kayak singles race.

"I don't feel any extra pressure," said a calm Barton in a pre-event interview with NBC Sports. "No American kayaker has ever won an Olympic gold medal. If I don't win, I'd be just like everyone else."

And for almost ten minutes following his race, Barton thought he indeed was just like everyone else.

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The race began the usual way for Barton, a slow start into a comfortable pace. There was even a strong headwind, another promising sign for Barton. What he hadn't counted on, however, was the Aussie coming on strong in a protected lane one. In fact, it seemed no one noticed that Grant Davies had gone out fast at the start, fell back for only a few hundred meters and then had poured it on to almost catch Barton at the finish. It was so close that the scoreboard actually reflected Davies as the winner and Barton second.

"When I crossed the finish line in the K-1, I thought I had won," said Barton. "And then my coach (Pawel Podgorski) and Andy Toro, (USOC secretary and former Olympic canoeist) came running up . . . and they told me I'd won," he added.

With that thought Barton hopped in the K-2 with teammate Bellingham to warm down before the double's race. The pair, who had taken fourth at the World's in the 1,000 meter doubles race last year, wanted to ensure that Barton was ready this time.

"We were favored to win a medal at the World's last year," explained Bellingham. "But Greg didn't warm down properly after his K-1 race and he tightened up at the end of our race. We wanted to make sure that didn't happen again," Bellingham added.

During the warm down, a roar from the crowd prompted Barton to look up at the scoreboard.

"When I looked over and saw the Australian listed first," remembered Barton, "I thought, boy, I hope somebody's up there looking at the photo finish to check this out!"

Someone was. Barton had already signed the sheet for the silver medal, when just before the athletes walked out for the awards ceremony an official told them there had been a mistake. It was the American who had won the gold after all with a time of 3:55.27 to Davies' 3:55.28 (the officials rounded up to the nearest one-one hundredth of a second).

"When the actual finishes were posted again, I had a real flip-flop of emotions," said Barton. "I felt very happy for me, but sorry for Grant."

Barton's emotions were not the only ones going crazy. His K-2 partner, Bellingham, watched Greg receive his gold medal and wondered if the warm down was enough to get Barton ready for

their race. Bellingham remembered clearly what happened last year, and besides, no one yet had won both the single and the double. The competition was tough, even without the favored French duo, Phillippe Boccara and Pascal Boucherit. Silver medalist in last year's World Championships, the French boat missed the start of its semi-final and was disqualified from the rest of the competition.

Bellingham had also trained with 1987 World Champions Paul MacDonald and Ian Ferguson in New Zealand for the past three years, and he had grown accustomed to their style. Now Bellingham would be racing against them with a partner whose style was the exact opposite of his.

"The New Zealander's strength is in their start," said Bellingham, "so it's tough for me to handle the slower start (like Barton's) sometimes."

And that is exactly how the U.S. pair started. The Australians, who stunned the field in the K-1 race, once again took the lead early on and maintained it until the Kiwi's caught them at the 500 meter mark. Team USA hovered somewhere in the middle.

"I always figure, 'well, I'll just pace out the start and then go for it in the end,'" said Barton. "When I looked over . . . and saw that we were 4th or 5th, I thought - great, perfect. But then I thought, 'boy, I hope Norman isn't going crazy back there,'" Meanwhile, Bellingham just hoped Barton "knew what he was doing."

With just 250 meters to go, Aussies Peter Foster and Kelvin Graham held a two second lead over MacDonald and Ferguson. The Americans, finally beginning to make a move, followed closely in third. All eyes were on Barton and Bellingham as they closed in on the tiring Aussies who had fallen out of the lead. The two from New Zealand did their best to hang on to first, but nothing could stop the force of the American boat as it shot through the finish line for the win. It was another excruciatingly close race, but this time they (and everyone else) knew they did it!

It was the second time that day the American flag flew high above the rest and the anthem sounded throughout the venue. Also that day, Greg Barton proved that he was definitely not like anyone else. No other U.S. kayaker had ever won a gold medal and no one else had ever won two consecutive gold medals in the K-1 and K-2 1,000 meter events in the

same regatta. In true champion style, Barton acknowledges his victories with some modesty.

"I've worked a long time, but I believed even more that if I didn't win, it would all still be worth it," said Barton. "I've learned through this sport how far I could push myself, and what I could really achieve. Medals? They're just icing on the cake for me."

Olympics Full of American Firsts

When it came to making firsts, Greg Barton led the field. He was the first American kayaker to win an Olympic gold medal and the first to win both the single and double events at 1000 meters in one Olympic competition. But, the firsts didn't stop there.

Mike Herbert was the first American kayaker to make the finals of the K-1, 500 meter event and this was the first time that American-made equipment was used in the Games. The paddles used by the men's K-4 and all of the U.S. Team's boats were designed and produced in the United States.

The boats, developed by the USCKT Equipment and Technology Committee in conjunction with Composite Engineering Inc., are the first to be designed from a total engineering plan. Through this plan, each component was carefully designed for optimum performance in respect to each of the other components. Van Dusen Boats has production rights in the U.S. and the first run will be available soon.

The paddles were produced by True Temper Sports, the official paddle of the U.S. Canoe & Kayak Team, with the assistance of National head coach, Paul Podgorski, and Olympic Champion, Greg Barton. According to Bob Bush, Manager of Technical Services for True Temper Sports, the paddles could be the best in the world.

"These paddles have a higher strength to weight ratio than any other paddle," said Bush. "This was our first time around and we felt we created an excellent paddle. We are looking forward to making improvements in the next few years and watching the U.S. Team win," he added.

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