



Naomi Riches: for the love of rowing

We talk to the incoming HWR chairman about her vision for the Regatta

Incoming Henley Women's Regatta chairman Naomi Riches MBE has a confession – she has never actually raced a side-by-side race at the Regatta, although she did race qualifiers in 2006 with her club, Marlow.

But HWR has a special place in Riches' heart. In 2001 a friend suggested they go along to watch and, on the banks of the Thames, she realised she loved rowing.

"It was a drizzly day and he brought a picnic, and I sat on the bank watching and I thought 'I want to be in this world,'" Riches remembers.

Riches is now very much in the world of rowing. After a stellar career for the British adaptive and para-rowing team which included six world titles, she retired from the squad, and is now preparing to take over from Miriam Luke as HWR chair.

"Although I haven't competed at Henley much, I feel like I know it so well as it sits with my values and what I think is important," she says. "I knew there would be a lot to learn, but it is a fantastic opportunity to give back to the sport that I love so much and that has given me so much."



Riches first tried rowing briefly while attending the Royal National Institute for the Blind College in Worcester, but did not keep it up while at university.

It was not until she had a call from the then-GB adaptive rowing coach, Simon Goody, in April 2004 that she got back into a boat. A friend had told Goody that Riches might be a good candidate for the adaptive rowing team – she was tall, female and visually impaired. Riches has a condition

called achromatopsia, which means she has no colour perception, struggles with bright light, and has monocular vision.

"It's like a black and white movie – slightly overexposed and out of focus," she explains.

By July that year, Riches was in the two-seat of the British LTA mixed 4+ winning gold at the 2004 Adaptive Rowing Championships in Banyoles.

"Everyone was a novice at that point – it was a really new sport and we were just starting to make it happen," Riches says. "The sport then developed over the next four years to become a full-time, Lottery funded elite sport."

She stuck with it. By the Beijing 2008 Paralympic Games, when para-rowing made its debut, the British coxed four were three-time world champions and expected to take home the first Paralympic gold medal in the event. But things did not go to plan.

Riches and her crew were second at the halfway mark in the final, but the Italians stretched away to win while the USA crew rowed through the British in the last 250m to take silver. The bronze medal, Riches admits, was a disappointment.

"We went there with confidence and maybe almost over-confidence," she says. "When the crews around us had changed their tactics and stepped up in their training, we didn't know how to respond to that. I don't think we'd ever felt so much pressure before, and we let the pressure get to us."

And yet the defeat may have been a blessing in disguise. "Looking back, I wouldn't change a thing, because it taught me so much," Riches adds. "Winning is what you want to do, it's why you're training, it's why you're making yourself hurt. But you can often learn so much more from the races that don't go well."

The loss in Beijing helped drive Riches on for the next four-year cycle towards the London 2012 Paralympics, and changed the way the British thought about training and racing.

"In 2012 our mindset was we're training to be able to win if we have a bad row," she says. "We're training to be able to win on a bad day."

In the final, all that played out. The Germans were leading with 300m to go, but the British stayed in their boat and trusted the training, their pace and their speed. They pushed, and won by two seconds – three-quarters of a length – in front of a packed home crowd at Eton Dorney. At that time visually impaired athletes had to race in blacked-out goggles, so Riches was relying entirely on her hearing and boat feel to race. For most of the race, the crowd was a boost, lifting the crew on.

"It just felt that everybody was in the boat rowing it with us," she says.

But in the last 250m, as the British rowed through Germany, the noise rose.

"The noise was just so loud and intense that I could no longer hear the Germans, and I could no longer hear Lily [Van Den Broecke, the cox]," Riches adds. "I could no longer hear the boat, I had to rely on feel. I was thinking I couldn't push any harder."

She focused on 10 strokes at a time, not knowing where the finish line was.

"The next thing I knew Dave [Smith] collapsed onto my feet and his oar swung over his head and hit me in



Naomi Riches prepares to take on the chairman's role from Miriam Luke

the stomach," Riches says, adding that this was when she knew they had finished and won.

Riches retired from the squad in 2013. She tried club rowing, but struggled with the change in pace and intensity, although she has now returned to the senior women's squad at Marlow RC in the wake of lots of lockdown erging. In 2016 she became the first woman to row the length of the Thames, in just under 48 hours. She did the challenge, she says, partly to prove a point that nobody should ever be defined by a disability.

"That's something that rowing has given me, the ability to be my best self and to not be defined by my disability," Riches says.

She says the values of HWR chime well with this ambition, adding that the Regatta gives rowers a place to give their best performances.

"It's just such a supportive environment, so well-run by incredible volunteers doing it purely for the love of the sport. It's addictive, I just want to be part of it," she explains.

In 2021, Riches is aiming to learn as much as she can about how HWR is run in order to pick up smoothly from Luke. As chair, Riches says her aim is to make sure HWR continues to be a Regatta that competitors, coaches and spectators come to enjoy and to achieve their best at.

She acknowledges that the increasing number of events at Henley Royal Regatta will change the focus for some athletes, but insists HWR's role in women's rowing remains relevant and crucial, with it remaining the highlight of many athletes' careers.

"Henley Women's is a stepping stone towards Henley Royal, but it's also the ultimate, most important finish line for a lot of athletes," Riches insists. "We stand on our own, we stand out as a unique and hugely positive experience." ■