



Olympics prepared kayaker for medicine's challenges

Heather Kent

Dr. Renn Crichlow, who has represented Canada 3 times at the Olympic Games, didn't step into a kayak until he was 12. Growing up in Ottawa, he and his schoolteacher mother drove past a local canoe club for years, until a friend encouraged him to try the sport. "I spent more time in the water than in the kayak," he says with a laugh. "It was a slow learning process."

But by age 19, and despite severe asthma, Crichlow had qualified for the Canadian team sent to the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. There, he progressed to the semifinals in the 4-man and singles events. By 1991 he was world champion for kayaking singles and he carried high expectations to the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. Unfortunately, he experienced a disappointing elimination in one event and finished seventh in the 1000-m race.

But Renn Crichlow excels in more than sport. In 1994 he graduated in kinesiology from BC's Simon Fraser University and achieved a 99th-percentile ranking on the medical college admission test. "He is one of the brightest individuals I've ever met," says Dr. Don McKenzie, physician and coach with the Canadian kayaking team who helped Crichlow keep his asthma under control. "He had all of the medical schools calling him."

Crichlow says he had "no good single reason" for wanting to become a doctor, although his father, who died when Crichlow was 2, was an obstetrician. He was fully prepared to attend medical school in British Columbia, and only applied to Harvard University as an afterthought. In the end, he chose Harvard mainly because the university didn't regard his kayaking career as an inconvenient disruption of his studies.

"They were really excited about me continuing to train and going to the Olympics again," says Crichlow. "There are a thousand other reasons why you could choose Harvard, but when they also tell you that you can keep on doing what you love doing, and they are willing to work with you on it, that really makes [the decision] easy."

Crichlow took his second year of medical school off to train for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics. In the 4-man event, his team finished 7th in the final and shaved 3 seconds off the Canadian record.

After the Atlanta Games, Crichlow retired from compe-

tion but not from the Olympics. These days he's vice-chair of the Canadian Olympic Association (COA) athletes council, which is trying to make the COA "more athlete centred" by lobbying for changes and formulating policies. Recently, it has tried to change the selection procedure for Olympic flagbearers.

In February 1999, Crichlow represented the council at the International Olympic Committee (IOC) conference on a proposed doping agency. "I felt like a Muslim going to Mecca," he says. "It was very exciting to be admitted to the hallowed halls."

But Crichlow was not so awed by the atmosphere that he forgot his message to the IOC delegates: he insisted that the new agency be headed by someone with an impeccable reputation who has been endorsed by athletes.

"While my comments were not well received by some, they were very well received by the majority of the people there. I think why I'm not afraid to call a spade a spade is because I have no political ambition. The only reason I'm involved in any kind of sports organization is that I want to give the people who are coming behind me the same opportunities that I had."

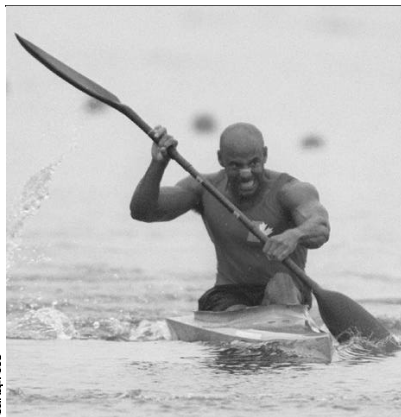
Crichlow thinks the proposed agency is "philosophically a fantastic idea. But something novel has to be tried because the system we have now doesn't have the confidence of the

athletes." Eventually, Crichlow "would love to be part of the medical commission and help out."

This June, Crichlow started a residency program in orthopedic surgery at Harvard. He says his Olympic career has prepared him well for the challenges of medicine. "I think that the coping skills I developed competing in lite sport will help. I learned strategies for dealing with the head games that people play at that high level, with the physical fatigue that you have from training. I also developed social skills by travelling all over the world and meeting new people.

"There is no situation I've come across in which I haven't been better prepared than almost anyone I know."

As for kayaking, "I'd definitely like to do it recreationally, when I have enough distance from it that it doesn't really matter any more. I don't think I have that yet." ?



Paddling to success: Crichlow at the 1996 Olympics