

UNIT TWO

LESSON SEVEN

RESOURCE

SILKEN LAUMANN

Prepared by the B.C. Sports Hall of Fame

Silken Laumann is best known for her achievements in rowing, but her original aspiration was to be a gymnast. At the age of 12 Silken worshipped her idol, Nadia Comaneci, the “perfect 10” gymnast at the 1976 Olympics. But Silken was not meant to be a gymnast, as she grew to be 5 foot 11 inches tall she came to realize that perhaps track and field was a more suitable quest. Silken excelled as a high school track star, but as Silken matured and grew bigger and stronger this was not a good combination for being a runner. This was when rowing came into Silken’s life. Rowing kind of picked Silken as opposed to Silken picking rowing. At the urging of her sister, Daniele, a member of the National Rowing Team, Silken tried out for rowing and realized this was the sport for her. In June 1983 at the age of 18, Silken qualified for the National Team. Rowing for Silken wouldn’t be without its ups and downs and tackling obstacles and persevering is what makes her such an exceptional individual and a great athlete.



Silken excelled at rowing and went on to win several medals and championships including a bronze medal at the 1984 Olympics in the double sculls with Daniele. Plagued by back problems and a pinched sciatic nerve for the next two years, Silken needed ongoing physiotherapy, but persevered and won a gold medal at the Pan American Games in 1987. In 1990 she earned a silver medal in single sculls at the World Championships and in 1991 captured the World Championships in single sculls making Canada a recognizable force in women’s rowing.

Expectations were rising and she was now a favourite for women’s single-sculls gold at the 1992. Barcelona Olympics. Amid all the speculation about her performance, May 15, 1992 became a fateful day for Silken. During a warm-up race in Germany, her shell was hit broadside by a German double sculls crew

crushing her leg and leaving her wondering whether she would ever row again. After

five operations in a ten day period and the possibility that her career in rowing could be over, Silken's courage and motivation was unwavering. After more than 3 weeks in hospital and still in a wheelchair (unable to walk) she insisted on getting into her racing shell and testing her limits. Being back on the water was like being able to fly, and with just five weeks to the Barcelona Olympics she was determined to compete. Her courageous comeback caught the imagination and admiration of not only her fellow Canadians but of the world, as she competed and won a bronze medal at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. At this point Silken took a year off from competitive rowing to fully allow her injury to heal. She spent her time sharing her motivating story through public speaking appearances, co-authored a book titled *Rowing, and* worked on other areas of interest.



Silken returned to her rowing career once again witnessing the tragedies and triumphs that sport can offer. In 1995 at the Pan American Games in Argentina, Silken and her three crewmates were stripped of their gold medals after she took a doctor recommended cold remedy and subsequently tested positive for a substance which was banned at the time but has since been removed from the list of banned substances. There was a mix-up between Benadryl, which she was allowed to take, and the Benadryl Decongestant that she took in error. Silken accepted responsibility, but believed that the doctor should have differentiated between the two drugs and could have saved her the embarrassment and damage to her reputation as a fair athlete. In her final competitive race at the July 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Silken won a silver medal in single sculls and three years later in 1999 officially announced her retirement from competitive rowing saying it was now time to take a new path and put her energy into other areas of her life and career.

That year Silken was awarded the highest award in the sport of rowing – the Thomas Keller Medal. The award was presented to mark an exceptional rowing career as well as exemplary personality and sportsmanship.

Silken Laumann's rowing career spanned more than a dozen years and despite earning medals in three Olympic Games ('84, '92, '96) she is often best remembered for her courage, fighting spirit and exemplary sportsmanship after a remarkable comeback following a boating accident that nearly put an end to her rowing career.

Silken now puts her passion and energy into three main areas of her life: raising her two children, travelling the continent with her inspirational speaking tour, and her charitable activities. Silken runs her own company and speaks to people about finding courage and striving to reach their full potential. Silken is known for her commitment to



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children. and gives her time to children's charities such as *Ronald McDonald House Charities*, *The Right to Play*, and recently established *The Silken Laumann Active Kid's Movement*. Silken is passionate about providing kids with a fun, safe and supportive environment in their homes, schools, and communities so they can be physically active and healthy.

Silken lives in Victoria, BC, with her two young children, William and Kate, and the family's golden retriever, Banner.

Silken has recently embarked on writing a book on child health and the importance of physical activity with an anticipated release date in the fall of 2005.

Silken's passion, determination, commitment and courage were demonstrated time and again throughout her career in sport and we can all learn from her experiences.