

## **Nico Rienks**

Ask anyone the question ‘What’s the best eight you’ve ever seen?’ and at the top of the list, is likely to be those flying Dutchmen who stormed to Olympic Gold in Atlanta. It wasn’t just that they destroyed a strong field but more the way they rowed. Led by Nico Rienks at stroke, it was all ‘touch and feel’. So much power on board and yet every stroke looked effortless. All the more remarkable because Rienks had started the sport as a sculler.

Eight years earlier, he had won his first Olympic Gold in a double, with Ronald Florijn. Rienks stroked that boat home with an effortless style to take Dutch rowing’s first team Olympic Gold for over sixty years. It was to be the start of a “golden age” for the “Boys in Orange”. To the young Nils Van der Zwan watching, there was little doubt who made it possible: “When I watched Nico make that big step in ’88 I thought why can’t I do it too?”

Rienks though had to find his inspiration the hard way. Before the Seoul Olympics, he was the best of a crop of fast Dutch scullers, who never quite had the pace to get on terms with the likes of Thomas Lange. But it was Rienks who had the vision to persuade Florijn to team up with him in Seoul. It was the start of a partnership that continued up to Atlanta. Rienks showed his versatility by winning Gold in doubles 1991, with a different partner, Henk-Jan Zwolle.

By then, Rienks was the biggest name in Dutch rowing. Since 1990, he had been holding a vision: that a Dutch eight might team up and take Gold in Atlanta. Van der Zwan explained: “Nico thought that if we could team up in an eight, it would be good for Holland.” But as usual, it took all of Rienks’ personality to convince the Dutch Federation to let the project succeed.

So unlikely was the idea, that many Dutch nicknamed the eight ‘The Sunflower Foundation’, after a cruiser that took elderly Dutch folk on trips down the Rhine. In 1993, when the eight could only finish 5<sup>th</sup> it seemed they were right. But Rienks’ nerve held and it was his belief and determination held that boat together. In 1996, they dominated every regatta.

Throughout that period, Rienks constantly worked to obtain sponsorship for his crew. Once he phoned up a baker with the same surname, who came up with some money for the crew. It was that determination to push the boundaries, often with the Federation, that was so characteristic of Rienks. Van der Zwan remembers the night before the Olympic final in Atlanta: “Nico had phoned up Asics and got us G1000 each if we wore their logo. That night, he and I ironed them on in our flat. The Federation didn’t like it but...”

Even as late as 1999 he was able to add yet another record to his achievements. His crew’s world best time of 5.22.8 from a repechage in the World Championships in St Catherine’s, Canada still stood some five years later – a testament to this remarkable oarsman. Rienks was awarded the Thomas Keller Medal in 2004.