

The Power of Play

Featuring **Silken Laumann**

Athlete Article



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, and 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 a runner.

This was when rowing came into Silken’s life. Rowing kind of picked up Silken, as opposed to Silken picking rowing. At the urging of her sister Daniele, a member of the National Rowing Team, Silken tried out rowing and realized this was the sport for her. In June 1983 at the age of 18, Silken qualified for Team Canada.

Rowing for Silken wouldn’t be without its ups and downs, tackling obstacles and persevering is what makes her an exceptional individual and 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 first 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. During a warm-up race in Germany, her shell was struck 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.

Another three weeks in hospital and still in a wheelchair and unable to walk, Silken 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.

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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 Benedryl Decongestant that she took in error. Silken accepted responsibility, but believed 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. She was not ready to 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, '82, '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 athletic pursuits.

Silken now puts her passion and energy into three main areas of her life: her 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 children, and gives her time to children's charities such as Ronald McDonald House Charities, Right to Play, and the recently established Silken Laumann Active Kids 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 children, William and Kate, and the family's golden retriever, Banner. Silken recently wrote a book on child health and the importance of physical activity. Silken's passion, determination, commitment and courage shown during her career in sport was exceptional and we can all learn from her experiences.