

Words DONNA MCLUSKIE // Photography HELIO CAEIRO FARIAS

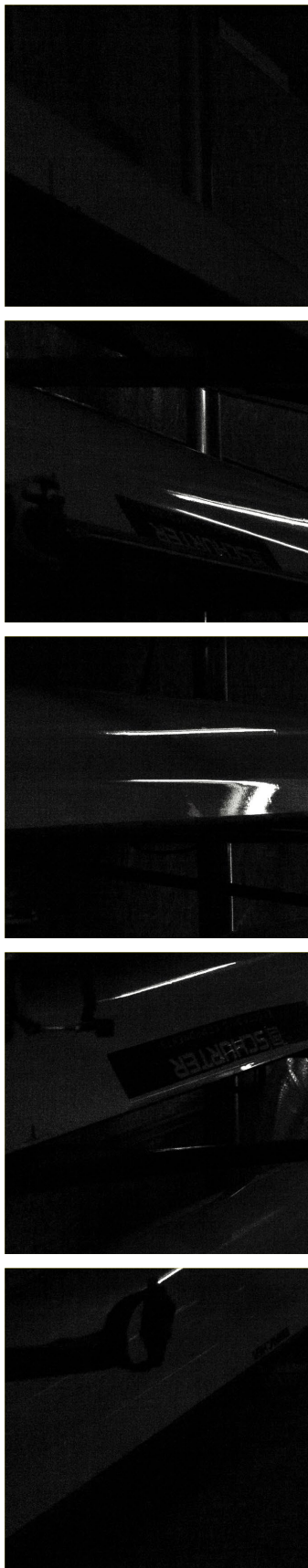
Jeannine Gmelin.
Happy Days.

HER

aving a difficult day? Perhaps you have time for a cheerful story? Meet Swiss Rowing Federation's national team single sculler Jeannine Gmelin. She is short (170cm), 27 years old, just back from injury and aglow with happiness. As far as I can tell, happiness is Gmelin's default setting. When I ask what would make a perfect outing, she struggles to decide. "If I say flat water then I feel bad about leaving out rough water because rough water makes more demands

and I like challenges. So maybe the best outing would be flat water in the beginning and then some choppy water near the end". And a perfect gym session? "Well," Gmelin considers the question, "I wake up pretty much every morning looking forward to training so it doesn't matter what is on the plan. A good weight session - lifting weights especially, I can't say the reason why, but it makes me feel good". →





“The bigger the challenge, the more I get excited.”

Left Gmelin at the Swiss rowing team base in Sarnen, Switzerland.

“With all of the training that I do I am really fit so I enjoy using that fitness in every way possible. I love lifting weights and as much as I love lifting weights, I love a hard session on the erg or on the lake. I have a big passion for working out. The bigger the challenge, the more I get excited. Although I do try to get in about eight hours of sleep a day, I am a morning person and sometimes I wake up a bit earlier because I feel so excited about going to train or row”.

This year, so far, has been full of highlights for Gmelin. She won gold in her single scull at both the Belgrade World Cup I and Lucerne World Cup III, with no racing between these two events due to a rib injury.

In February, Robin Dowell became Head Coach for the Swiss Federation's elite rowing team.

“Not every boat from the squad is coached by Robin but I am,” explains Gmelin. “So I get to work with him every day. I enjoy it so much! Robin and I share a picture of how a rowing stroke should look like. We really have the same picture, which makes it quite easy and fun to work together”.

Although Gmelin has been rowing for 15 years, she made the decision to get more serious about the sport in 2011 while watching her brother race as a lightweight. “I loved the atmosphere and the supportive vibe in the stands,” she recalls.

But despite some strong races, including a spectacularly easy win at the Swiss Champs in Lucerne in 2012, Gmelin didn't make the national team until 2014. As Gmelin continued to train at club level, her coach knew the German national team coach for the heavyweight women's sculling squad, Sven Ueck. “So it was arranged that I could go to Germany for three months to have my first experience of full time rowing. Without the support of my rowing club and the rowing club in Berlin, I would never have been →

“It feels like a symphony of motion and the flow everyone talks about in rowing is there.”

able to do this. At the German camp, it became clearer what I was capable of. There were noticeable gains but I was still not good enough, not the best in my country, so I knew I had to somehow raise my game”.

Back in Switzerland, Gmelin worked part time at a children's daycare centre and trained as much as possible. “My family supported me the best they could but it was not easy at all”.

With a strong German base during her early rowing training plus, eventually, the influence of the New Zealand and Australian coaches who worked with the Swiss Federation squad prior to the arrival this year of ex-GB coach Dowell, I ask Gmelin what influence Dowell's coaching has had thus far on her rowing style. “In my sculling I would say that Robin has helped me find a more fluid way of rowing. Also, physically I've progressed quite a bit this year despite my injury. Changes that I experience now only come in small steps, yet I have seen some pretty big improvements on how I move the boat”.

“It feels like a symphony of motion and the flow everyone talks about in rowing is really there. I notice that the sequencing is not doing anything like a pause somewhere. It's more that every part of the stroke leads to the next one without any disturbances. It feels really natural”.

“Before this year I had picked up a kind of posing attitude at the finish. Now, at the back end, it's almost the same speed coming in as going out. Timing and preparation to approach the catch have also become so important because this has a huge benefit on the rest of the stroke”.

In 2015 Gmelin placed fifth at the world championships and qualified for the Rio Olympic games. “I got an Olympic rings tattoo on my wrist to celebrate,” Gmelin smiles. “Since I was fifteen I had wanted a tattoo but my mother said I was too young. It's good that she had forbidden it then because this meant that I really took time to think about what subject to have and where it should be. So for my first tattoo I had a rower that is placed near the aorta on my neck. For me rowing is so much more than training. It is about a love for life. Rowing is the way I approach my life so that's why I chose to have the rower tattoo close to my aorta, the big vessels that go to my heart”.

Since making the Swiss national team in 2014, Gmelin has had funding as a full-time athlete. “As from February this year, I am part of the Swiss military. They have created a special job for athletes to support them so my job is to do my training and deliver the best results possible and in return they pay me a salary every month. Another big part of my funding comes from an association called Stif that supports all different kinds of Swiss athletes. That funding is means tested”.

Swiss single scullers won both men's (Nico Stahlberg) and women's (Jeannine Gmelin) gold at this year's World Cup I in Belgrade. With new ex-GB coaches for the Swiss rowing team this year (head coach Robin Dowell – formerly the head coach of Sir William Borlase school and ex-head coach of the GB junior team programme, plus assistant coach Bill Lucas – an ex-GB athlete), I ask Gmelin for some insight about the future of Swiss rowing.

Leading up to the Rio Olympics, Gmelin says that the Swiss Federation and

coaches built up quite a good system for training and squad coherence. The national rowing team comprises around a dozen athletes. Most experienced amongst them is Nico Stahlberg, who raced in the heavyweight men's quad in both London and Rio Olympics.

“All of this training from previous years starts to pay off and now we have Robin, who is a very innovative coach, to lead us forward. He has already brought changes into our system that are having a big impact on the younger part of the squad, especially the U23s who are doing really well,” says Gmelin. “This year we have shown already that we are a small team but we are really strong and I think this is also a trend for the future of Swiss rowing”.

“One of Robin's good characteristics is that he emphasises quality over quantity. That suits us well because the Swiss team will never be the biggest. How someone starts with rowing here in Switzerland is completely different to the start of rowing, for example, in New Zealand. Rowing there is a national sport but rowing in Switzerland – no one knows what rowing is!”

With relentless focus and big race wins, Gmelin is making her mark on the history of women's rowing in Switzerland. She is the first to compete in an Olympic final and the first world cup winner.

“Perhaps I am a role model for younger female athletes and I feel privileged to be able to inspire younger kids in that way. I had a really happy childhood and am having good experiences now. I am so lucky to have such a supportive team around me. Everyone should have the chance to pursue →



Top Jeannine's sculler tattoo

Inset During racing in the World Cup series. Photos by Bernhard Marbach

their dreams and I will continue to seek ways to give back some of the good that I have experienced in my life so far. I enjoy doing that very much".

Last year, Gmelin was invited to join the Great Eight crew at the Head of the Charles Regatta. Although she counts the Rio Olympics as her most incredible experience so far, the week she spent at the HOCA was "mind-blowing".

"In the boat, the respect for each other was amazing and the fun we had the whole week was one of the best times I've ever had in my life. I am so much looking forward to returning! HOCA is a really big regatta, we have nothing even close to this size in Switzerland. The atmosphere was just electrifying. And we won our race".

"Jeannine is a tough cookie and wonderful to be around," says Olympic sculler and Great Eight crew captain Gevvie Stone. "She's very focussed at 2k regattas, and it was great to get to know her better in a more casual setting at HOCA last year."

Gmelin's social media motto reads *"The will to succeed is important but what is*

more important is the will to prepare."

Gmelin's life story so far is brimming with positivity. As a consequence, she is a huge asset to her national team, to the Great Eight crew of international scullers and as an ambassador for our sport.

"I remember my first outing in a single," she tells me, laughing. "I was like Oh no, I'm never going back in this boat, because it felt so unstable and I didn't enjoy it at all. But now I love it so much".

Gmelin uses Concept2 skinnies with the vortex edge and an Empacher.

"I'm racing the single and I enjoy single sculling very much because you are kind of your own boss. It's really honest. You cannot hide from anything. You have to face your fears and you must face your weaknesses and that is something I like very much".

"Even if a session isn't as good as I would like it to be, I try to take something positive out of it. The lakes of Switzerland where I train are very beautiful. They are my office and being in the boat is my happy place. So what else do I want more?" **ROW360**