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Making Seconds Count

After narrowly missing the Olympics, Steve Whelpley '05 returns to Mayflower Hill ready to help train the next generation of Colby rowers

By Kate Carlisle

For world-class rowers like Steve Whelpley '05, victory is often measured in tenths of a second or even less.

So is defeat.

But after a near-miss to make the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro the former Colby rower—who this summer joined the College as assistant to his former crew mentor, head crew coach Stew Stokes—has learned a new, more satisfying kind of measurement.

“It’s a cliché—that it’s the journey and not the destination—and the same things that make that sentiment noble and accessible make me resist it,” Whelpley said.

Whelpley and rowing partner Willy Cowles fell just short of qualifying for Rio in the men’s double scull at the final qualification regatta in Switzerland in May. It was the third Olympic Trials test for Whelpley, who took fourth in 2008 in a single and second in 2012 in a double.

“Even though it was incredibly important for me to make the Olympics on a reputational level, it was also personal. I was proving it to myself, and that was wrapped up in the whole effort,” Whelpley said. “All the sports psychology you read says you have to live in the moment, in that flow. That’s easier said than done.”

Whelpley, who sat in the No. 7 seat at Colby, helped the Mules defeat Oxford University’s Isis Boat Club at the Henley Royal Regatta in 2005. After graduating, he joined Penn Athletic Club in Philadelphia—in the heart of the U.S. rowing world—and proceeded to focus on being the best in what some have called the most physically demanding team sport. He moved from sweep rowing to sculling, ultimately competing in the World Rowing Championships in 2013 and 2014. At the 2012 Head of the Charles, Whelpley finished second in the single scull and beat reigning Olympic gold medalist Mahé Drysdale.

Those were the thrills of victory, but Whelpley had to face a different result. “Now I’m settling down and seeing that the years I spent rowing, rowing toward something—that hunger—shaped me. I’m able to relish that now.”

Instead of letting his disappointment end his rowing journey, Whelpley is focusing on the next generation of world-class rowers, using his hard-won experience to coach the Mules. As it happens, one of the sleek Colby shells is named for Whelpley. That will be in his mind when he gives his teams the coach’s traditional racing sendoff: “Go fast.”

ATHLETICS



Former Colby rower Steve Whelpley '05, who narrowly missed qualifying for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Whelpley returned to Colby this fall as assistant crew coach.