

2016 OLYMPIC ROWING

# A Case Of Love At First Pull

Meghan O'Leary Got A Late Start At Rowing, But Made Up For It Big Time



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U.S. ROWING

**MEGHAN O'LEARY**, left, who learned to row at Riverfront Recapture in Hartford in 2010, is going to row in the Olympics in Rio this summer in the double sculls with Ellen Tomek, who is at right above.

**M**eghan O'Leary was a two-sport athlete at Virginia, playing softball and volleyball, but she had never rowed before she tried it six years ago in Hartford

Brian Wendry, Riverfront Recapture's director of rowing programs, was impressed when O'Leary walked in the door of the Connecticut River boathouse. O'Leary was tall, athletic and when she tested on the erg, or rowing machine, the numbers were impressive.

So impressive that eventually he called the national coach, even though Wendry didn't know him. I'm in Hartford, and I have this woman, Wendry told the coach. She's never rowed ... but she's pulling these great times."

The coach listened. O'Leary got a chance to try out for the national team. She made it.

This August — six years after she first got in a boat — O'Leary, 31, will put on a USA uniform and row in the double sculls with Ellen Tomek in the Rio Olympics.

"It's just amazing," Wendry said. "It's the first time anybody we taught to row went to the Olympics."

"It's very exciting," said their coach, Sarah Trowbridge, a 2012 Olympian from Guilford.

"They're doing a great job," O'Leary, originally from Louisiana, played two years of volleyball at Virginia and four years of softball. At Virginia, her teams worked out with the rowing team a lot and she became friends with the rowing coach. He told her, hey if things don't work out with the other sports, you should try rowing.

"That planted the seed," she said. Upon graduation, she went to Charlotte to work for ESPN, then was promoted to a position in Connecticut in production in 2010. She was looking for something to do and remembered what the coach at Virginia said, so she looked up Riverfront Recapture, which has a number of

"I'd never been in a boat before. I needed lessons. I had to get permission, because it ended at 8:30 [a.m.] and I was going to be late for work. From day one, I absolutely loved it.



**Meghan O'Leary**

rowing programs run out of its boathouse on the Connecticut River.

"I'd never been in a boat before," O'Leary said. "I needed lessons. I had to get permission, because it ended at 8:30 [a.m.] and I was going to be late for work. From day one, I absolutely loved it.

"I remember Brian Wendry saying, 'What's your deal? Who are you?' I'm tall. I'm athletic and I don't know a thing. I'm the youngest one. I'm 25. I was so outside of my comfort zone."

"They're targeted toward juniors and seniors in college," O'Leary said. "I went to Princeton. You're standing in line and they're taking your age. I mumbled '1984.' I was by far the oldest one there."

She had to pull a sub-715 2K on the erg. She pulled a 7:08. She made the cut.

Then she had to start training seriously, so Wendry introduced her to coaches at Trinity and she bought her own boat and started

training there and racing. A year later, she moved to Princeton to train and compete more. ESPN modified her job so she could continue to work but she ended up leaving the network in spring 2013 to devote herself full time to training to try to make it to the Olympics.

"When it became apparent that nobody works 30-plus hours and rows, I knew if I really wanted to succeed and do this, I needed to hang it up," O'Leary said.

In late April, O'Leary and Tomek, who finished fifth in the double sculls at the Beijing Olympics in 2008, won the Olympic trial final in Sarasota, Fla., to secure a spot on the team for Rio.

"I think it's still sinking in," O'Leary said.

"It was a great feeling. You cross that line and you think, 'Wow, this is actually happening.' We've put in all this time, all this work and it hits you. I was overwhelmed for a few days. I wasn't able to process my emotions. I was excited but not believing it yet.

"Now we're going. We want to

do well." O'Leary and Tomek are training in Princeton with Trowbridge, whose husband, Bryan Volpenhein, coaches the national team. Trowbridge finished sixth in the double sculls with Margot Shumway at London in 2012 and coached at Yale before getting married and moving to Princeton.

"Ellen and Sarah trained several years together," O'Leary said. "It's a three-person team. She's a great coach, she has a great eye and a great way of explaining rowing. She has benefited us immensely. We've seen a lot of improvement. She knows the boat. She knows what it takes."

Of the three, O'Leary is the only one who hasn't been to the Olympics.

"We've talked about that," Trowbridge said of going to the Olympics. "I've been really trying to pass on that experience. It's so hard until you've actually been there. It's unbelievable what it's like. It's the culminating championship for every sport, every event and it can just blow your mind. You have to remember it's another race. We've talked about keeping those standards high."

The rowers also face concerns about polluted water and mosquito-transmitted Zika virus.

"People say, 'Well, did you ever think about not going?' Absolutely not," O'Leary said. "All the teams will have to deal with it. ... We're trying not to stress about it."

RUNUP TO OLYMPICS

## Brussels Bomber's Brother Winner

Gets Gold In Taekwondo

Associated Press

MONTREUX, Switzerland — Mourad Laachraoui, the brother of one of the Brussels airport suicide bombers, keeps enhancing his Olympic taekwondo prospects after winning his third gold medal this year.

Laachraoui earned his biggest title yet in the European taekwondo championships, when he beat Jesus Tortosa Cabrera of Spain 6-3 in the under-54 kilogram final this week. That was after he defeated Stanislav Denisov of Russia, a world championship bronze medalist last year, in the semifinals.

Laachraoui was a younger brother of Najim Laachraoui, who blew himself up in Brussels in March and whose DNA was also found on the suicide vests of two men in the Paris attacks. After the Brussels attacks, Laachraoui distanced himself from his brother, saying he'd had no contact with Najim since he left for Syria in 2013.

Mourad stayed in Belgium, and said he felt "scared and saddened" by the attacks.

This year, he's won his division in the U.S. Open in February and Luxor Open in Egypt in March, and has bronzes from the Canadian Open and Fujairah Open.

Ranked third in the world in his class, he has already qualified for the Rio de Janeiro Olympics. But with only four classes at Rio, Laachraoui doesn't make the top-10 rankings in the lightest Olympic class, under-58kg. If Belgium picks him, he will meet heavier fighters.

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YARD GOATS 5, FISHER CATS 3

## Big Third Inning Helps Hartford

From a press release

MANCHESTER, N.H. — The Hartford Yard Goats scored three times in the third inning, including back-to-back home runs from David Dahl and Ryan McMahon, on the way to beating the New Hampshire Fisher Cats 5-3 at Northeast Delta Dental Stadium.

The win was Hartford's third in a row and moved it to 11 games above .500.

McMahon also had a single and a double and drove in a pair of runs. Tyler Anderson pitched five innings to earn his first win of the season. Berlin's Matt Carasiti recorded a four-out save, his Eastern League-leading 13th of the season.

The Yard Goats go for a three-game sweep Sunday.

Hartford (26-15) jumped out to a lead in the first inning on Ryan McMahon's two-out RBI double, scoring Raimel Tapia from second base off starter Luis Santos. New Hampshire (19-21) answered with two runs in the second off Anderson.

But the Yard Goats scored three runs in the third inning to pull in front for good. Tapia led off with a single and scored on Dahl's homer to center field. McMahon followed with a solo home run, the first time Hartford has hit back-to-back homers this season.

Carasiti came in with two outs in the eighth with runners at first and third and retired Matt Dean on two pitches to end the Fisher Cats' threat.

EASTERN LEAGUE

EASTERN	W	L	PCT.	GB
Reading	27	14	.659	—
Hartford	26	15	.634	1
Trenton	22	17	.564	4
New Hampshire	19	21	.475	7½
Binghamton	17	23	.425	9½
Portland	15	27	.357	12½
WESTERN	W	L	PCT.	GB

Akron	30	11	.732	—
Altoona	23	18	.561	7
Harrisburg	20	20	.500	9½
Bowie	17	24	.415	13
Erie	17	24	.415	13
Richmond	11	30	.268	19

SATURDAY'S RESULTS

Hartford 5, New Hampshire 3  
Harrisburg 7, Bowie 2  
Richmond 9, Erie 0  
Akron 5, Binghamton 2  
Portland at Altoona, p.p.d., TBA  
Trenton at Reading, p.p.d., TBA

SUNDAY'S SCHEDULE

Erie at Richmond, 12:05 p.m.  
Bowie at Harrisburg, 1:30 p.m.  
Hartford at New Hampshire, 1:35 p.m.  
Binghamton at Akron, 2:05 p.m.  
Trenton at Reading, 2:05 p.m.  
Portland at Altoona, 6 p.m.

YARD GOATS 5, FISHER CATS 3

HARTFORD	AB	R	H	BI
Tapia cf	5	2	3	0
Vaiaika 2b	4	1	0	0
Dahl rf	5	1	2	2
McMahon 3b	4	1	3	2
Herrera lf	4	0	1	1
Vazquez dh	4	0	0	0
Prime 1b	4	0	2	0
Williams c	4	0	1	0
Osborne ss	4	0	0	0
TOTALS	38	5	12	5

NEW HAMPSHIRE

NEW HAMPSHIRE	AB	R	H	BI
Fields cf	4	0	0	0
Berti lf	4	0	0	0
Tellez 1b	3	0	0	0
Dean 3b	4	1	1	0
Smith Jr. rf	4	1	2	1
Saez c	3	0	0	0
Hobson dh	3	0	0	0
Quitz jr. 2b	3	0	0	1
Lopes 2b	3	0	0	1
Flores ss	4	0	2	0
TOTALS	33	3	6	3

Hartford 103 000 100 — 5

N. Hampshire 020 000 001 — 3

E: Dean. DP: New Hampshire 1. LOB: Hartford 9, New Hampshire 6. 2B: Flores (2), McMahon, Dean. HR: Dahl, McMahon, Saez. St. Vaiaika. SF: Lopes. SB: Tapia, Smith.

HARTFORD IP H R ERBSO ERA  
Anderson (W, 1-1) 5 4 2 2 0 4 1.80  
Niebla 2 0 0 0 1 7.35  
Wade 1/3 1 0 1 1 2.42  
Carasiti (S, 13) 1/3 1 1 1 2 2.50

NEW HAMPSHIRE IP H R ERBSO ERA  
Santos (L, 4-1) 6 7 4 2 3 3.59  
Barnes 2 4 1 0 2 0.54  
Smith 1 1 0 0 1 0.42

WP: Anderson (2). Umpires: Costello, Mang, Clemens. Time: 2:53. A: 5,529.

FRENCH OPEN, TODAY, 1 P.M. (NBC)

## Djokovic Seeks Elusive Title

Serb Hasn't Won At Roland Garros

By JEROME PUGMIRE

Associated Press

PARIS — Novak Djokovic will be celebrating his 29th birthday when the French Open starts on Sunday. If nothing else, it underlines just how frustrating it has become for the top-ranked Serb to win the only major to elude him.

Djokovic, who has lost the past two finals here and three altogether, is playing his 12th tournament and would set a record for most appearances at Roland Garros before winning the title in the Open era. Four players — Stan Wawrinka last year, Roger Federer in 2009, Andre Agassi in 1999 and Andres Gomez in 1990 — all won on their 11th appearance. Goran Ivanisevic holds the Open era Grand Slam record of needing 14 attempts before winning Wimbledon in 2001.

Although Djokovic insists he is not "obsessed" with winning the elusive title, he may never get a better chance, because nine-time champion Rafael Nadal is still finding his best form on clay, Wawrinka has been erratic and the 17-time Grand Slam champion Federer is skipping the tournament to protect his troublesome back. Second-second Andy Murray could pose a serious threat, having beaten Djokovic in the Italian Open final last weekend.

"Of course I anticipate myself, as everybody else [does], to try to get my hands on this title this year," Djokovic said. "Even if my career

was done tomorrow, I made some achievements that I must be proud of. So that's how I approach things. I don't try to approach them from a point of view of being obsessed with this tournament or with any other tournament, for that matter."

Federer has always been a huge fan's favorite, wherever he plays, and the hard-to-please Parisian fans have warmly taken Nadal to their hearts since he won for the first time here as a scraggly-haired teenager in 2005.

Perhaps seeking that extra bit of energy to take him all the way, Djokovic clearly wants to get the French fans on his side.

This was evident on Saturday when, before starting his practice, he goofed around wearing a beret as he played the traditional French game called petanque — albeit with yellow tennis balls instead of those heavy metallic ones — and jokingly played around with a violin.

Or perhaps Djokovic is just trying to reduce the pressure and expectations. It's not hard to see why because, since the start of 2015, he's 119-9 overall, winning four majors and 16 titles — including a tour-leading five this year.

He has won 11 majors and could yet equal Nadal's haul of 14 by the end of the year.

When Djokovic lost the 2014 French Open final to Nadal, the Spaniard was still the player to beat on clay.

That's now changed. Despite Nadal winning the Monte Carlo Masters for a ninth time in April and following up with a ninth success at Barcelona to equal Guillermo Vilas' record of 49 career clay-court titles, he is in Djokovic's shadow, even on clay.

Djokovic has beaten him seven

consecutive times since that 2014 final — crushing him in three sets in the quarterfinals here last year and beating him twice more on clay, most recently in the quarterfinals of the Italian Open.

Enticingly, they could meet in the semifinals this year, which would be their 50th meeting and on Nadal's 30th birthday — not that Nadal needs any extra motivation.

Djokovic leads him 26-23 in head-to-heads and this is his equal-best winning streak against Nadal, having previously beaten him seven consecutive times — all of them in finals: six in 2011 and then the 2012 Australian Open.

Nadal's first-round opponent will be big-serving Sam Groth, an Australian ranked 95th.

"He's a difficult one," said Nadal, who has never played Groth. "I know he's going to be difficult to have breaks against."

Djokovic faces 100th-ranked Lu Yen-hsun while Murray opens against veteran Radek Stepanek, and Wawrinka has a tricky first match against hard-hitting Czech Lukas Rosol.

Defending champion Serena Williams is bidding for her fourth Roland Garros title and needs one more major to equal Steffi Graf's record for the Open era.

Sunday's first-round men's play features fifth-seeded Kei Nishikori of Japan, No. 8 Milos Raonic of Canada and big-hitting Australian Nick Kyrgios, while on the women's side, No. 5 Simona Halep of Romania, 11th-seeded Czech Lucie Safarova — last year's runner-up — and 2009 champion Svetlana Kuznetsova are playing. Also, No. 15 John Isner and No. 19 Sloane Stephens are among nine Americans in action.

Hartford Courant media group

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