

Sir Steve Redgrave at 50: Why I'm still messing about on the river - video interview

Redgrave remains favourite to light the Olympic flame at the opening ceremony 127 days from now and he unashamedly covets a role he richly deserves

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Golden champion: Sir Steve Redgrave won Olympic Gold in five consecutive Games spanning 25 years

Getty

Olympics legend Sir Steve Redgrave turns 50 tomorrow and he's back in a boat - but hold your fire.

The five-times rowing gold medallist, who invited us to shoot him if he ever went near a boat again after bringing home the bullion from Atlanta 16 years ago, is taking to the water again in next month's Devizes to Westminster race.

If he wins, it will be the icing on the kayak for a champion who was the closest thing to Clark Kent in a canoe Britain has ever produced.

Thirty years ago Henry Fonda won an Oscar for his performance in Hollywood drama *On Golden Pond*, but Redgrave - who comes from another movie dynasty (his grandfather was a cousin of actor Sir Michael Redgrave) - was the real king of golden ponds.

From Los Angeles to Seoul, Barcelona, Atlanta and Sydney, he put the oars in awesome.

How he would love to be part of a crew on the water at Eton Dorney in this summer's London 2012 rowing competition, where Redgrave expects Britannia to rule the lakes - instead he must settle for channelling his racing instincts along benign waters from Wiltshire to the capital in a fortnight.

"People talk about my era and the time I won my fifth gold in Sydney as the

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golden era of British rowing,” said Sir Steve on a visit to the Mirror office yesterday.



So proud: The gold medal machine Sir Steve

“But in Sydney we won two golds and a silver, in Beijing four years ago we won two golds, two silver and two bronze medals - and this team is much stronger.

“I wouldn’t need to be 15 years younger to be tempted to come out of retirement this summer - it looks like Greg Searle, who was 40 on Tuesday, is going to be in the team this year and I was 38 in Sydney.

“If I had known London was going to come round within four to six years, I would have carried on. I would have loved to compete in an Olympics on home waters, but it’s not going to happen.

“At least I’m back in a boat because I’m doing the Devizes to Westminster race at Easter - 125 miles paddling forwards, which is alien to a rower who’s spent most of his life going backwards.

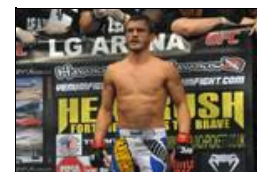
“An old friend, Roger Hatfield, who went to the same school as me in Marlow, did it last year but he didn’t finish the course because there was a heatwave in April and he had to pull out with heatstroke.

“When I rang him and volunteered to do it with him this year, I thought he would probably recycle that line from Atlanta - but we’ve come too far downstream to row back to the shore now.

“You paddle along the Avon and Kennet canal for 54 miles before you join the Thames at Reading and I’ve been training properly because I’m too old to be messing about on the river.

“After all those years of rowing backwards, going forwards in a kayak has been a culture shock.”

Redgrave remains the favourite to light the Olympic flame at the London 2012 opening ceremony 127 days from now and he unashamedly covets a role he richly deserves.



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Back on the water: But Sir Steve is in a kayak now

But if awarding the symbolic ignition was down to him, he would give it to Dame Mary Peters, pentathlon queen at Munich in 1972 - where Mark Spitz's seven gold medals in the pool first fired his Olympian spirit.

"We always had the Daily Mirror delivered in our house and I can remember the back page headline 'Spitz for Six' after his sixth gold, little realising a seventh would soon follow," he said before explaining why multiple medals are not necessarily a short cut to the sporting pantheon.

"You can ask why Chris Hoy was knighted for winning three gold medals in Beijing but Ben Ainslie doesn't get a knighthood for winning a gold at three successive Games.

"Taking nothing away from Chris, who is a friend of mine and a role model in every sense, but it just shows how our honours system can be very media driven.

"Would I like him to go past my British record of five golds? Put it this way, I hope he is as successful this summer as he was in Beijing because that means we are enjoying success as a country.

"But I don't like this ranking of greatness based purely on how many gold medals you bring home. There are sports where it is possible to submit multiple entries in a series of disciplines which are quite close together and where an athlete on top of his game, as Michael Phelps was in Beijing, can sweep the board.

"If we look towards who is the greatest of the greats, it can overshadow the achievements of someone like Ben, who is probably the finest Olympic sailor ever to set sail."

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- Sir Steve Redgrave is an ambassador for Matalan Sporting Promise, which helps get kids active in schools across the country. Visit www.matalansportingpromise.co.uk for details.

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