

RIO OLYMPIANS: IRISH MAKE THEIR MARKS

BY TODD BURLAGE



The United States Gold-Medal Winning Women's Eight (Amanda Polk is the third from the left).

Excuse Amanda Polk if she still gets choked up when asked to describe the best day of her life as an athlete and to revisit the necessary patience and perseverance required during her agonizing four-year wait to reach this magical moment.

Polk, a 2008 Notre Dame graduate, has taken a whirlwind tour since returning to the United States last month with the perfect travel companion she partnered with at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil—her gold medal.

Polk struck gold as a member of the U.S. women's eight rowing team, a win that marked the third straight gold medal and the 11th consecutive world and Olympic championship for the U.S. in this event since 2006.

"When the race was over, it was almost like a movie reel of flashbacks going through my mind of everything I had

put into it," Polk recalled. "And then I just started sobbing. It was just pure joy."

Ten athletes and two coaches represented Notre Dame in Rio as former or current Irish student-athletes, and Polk was one of five who participated in medal-winning competition at the games.

Polk claimed gold, and U.S. men's basketball assistant coach Monty Williams helped that squad finish atop the standings. Notre Dame graduates Gerek Meinhardt and Mariel Zagunis both won bronze medals in fencing for the U.S., while Melissa Tancredi scored a bronze medal in women's soccer with Team Canada.

Polk's triumphant victory tour is moving through campus this weekend with other members of the Irish Olympic contingent in town to be recognized during the Stanford football game for their Rio representation.

"I wouldn't miss this weekend for any-

thing," Polk said of her first return trip to campus in four years. "I wanted to come back with a gold medal to bring back to Notre Dame and share with all the alumni and all the current students exactly what you can accomplish through hard work and perseverance."

And perseverance is the operative word when understanding the level of satisfaction, jubilation—and, frankly, relief—Polk holds post Rio.

While winning gold in a rowing event the U.S. women have dominated for the last decade might seem more certain than inspiring, the Rio race itself and all that went into Polk finally securing her seat on the winning boat suggest otherwise.

Polk's personal high this summer from her Rio triumph stands in direct contrast to the lows she felt four years ago during preparations for the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London.



Melissa Tancredi (right) helped the Canadian Women's Soccer Team win a bronze medal at the Rio Olympic Games.

Only a few weeks removed from helping the U.S. women set a world record in Lucerne, California, in the women's eight competition, Polk was blindsided during the participation selection process for the London Games when she was demoted from competitor to alternate.

"When I went to London, it was a very difficult experience for me," Polk ad-

mitted of losing the seat on a boat she thought was all hers. "I was honored to be there to support my teammates in case they needed me, but at the same time, I'm not very good at sitting on the sidelines."

Four years is a long time to wait for a second chance and Polk wasn't sure if she was up to the Rio challenge follow-

ing her London letdown.

"I had to decide if I was okay ending my career as a rower on that note of being an Olympic alternate. Would I be okay with that?" she said. "I just couldn't do it. I came so close to being on the team and I just missed it. I felt like I owed it to myself to give myself one last chance to make an Olympic boat and to medal."

So, armed with her London lessons and a giant support network of family, friends and her fiancé (Polk is set to marry Eric Sobolewski next month), she went to work for four more years and parlayed earning a spot on the eight boat at Rio into a gold medal and self pride worth its *weight* in gold.

"I could've easily gotten flashbacks from 2012 and really have gotten spooked and made myself nervous for no reason," Polk said of those few anxious moments before the start of the gold medal race. "However, because I truly trusted in how much I had put into this, I believe I had the strength to remain calm and the confidence to know that I had come a long way."

Her championship race lasted only six minutes and one second. But the memories will last forever.

Running short of the lead at the half-way point of the 2,000-meter race, boat coxswain Katelin Snyder called on pride and tradition to close the gap. "THIS IS THE U.S. WOMEN'S EIGHT!" Snyder implored.

The message took.

"At that point, there was an electricity that ran through all of us. Nobody could stop us because we knew it was something greater than just the nine people in the boat," Polk recalled. "This was the legacy that the USA women's eight had already built, so we were honoring those before us and setting the tone for those that are still to come after us. It was a magical moment."

Polk may have been the only former Irish athlete to strike Rio gold, but she certainly wasn't the only one to grab Rio headlines.

In fact, former Irish fencer Zagunis, who competes professionally as a U.S. team member, added to her hardware collection in Rio when she secured a

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bronze medal in team sabre.

"I do think we had a really good chance at gold, we were really close," Zagunis said. "But it was still another great experience for me. I'm really happy and fortunate to compete in four Olympics so far, so I am very grateful for that."

This was the fourth Olympic medal for Zagunis, tying her for the most by an Irish athlete in University history. In 2004 at the Athens Summer Olympic Games, she became the first U.S. woman to win a gold medal in fencing.

"It's always been a really great sense of pride for me to be part of the Notre Dame family," said Zagunis, who will be making her first trip back to campus this weekend since being part of the Irish Olympic contingent that was recognized in 2012 after the London Summer Games. "Especially at a place like Notre Dame, where hundreds of fantastic athletes come out of there, to be on that list

is pretty fantastic for me."

Anyone familiar with Irish track and field knows how accomplished distance runner Molly Huddle, a 2006 Notre Dame graduate, has blossomed.

Huddle's time of 30:13.17 in Rio set a U.S. women's record for the 10,000 meters and left Huddle with a sixth-place overall finish in the fastest Olympic field ever for this event.

"The race was bittersweet for me," said Huddle, who also competed at the London Olympics. "I only ended up sixth (in Rio), but obviously I was excited to set the American record on such a big stage. But with the time I ended up running, I thought that would be good enough to medal.

"But, you look to your left and right, and you see world record-holders and legendary runners, so you just have to try and treat it like any other race and run with them as long as you can."

In terms of family affair, former Notre Dame fencers Kelley and Courtney Hurdley kept Notre Dame well-represented.

Rio marked the third Summer Olympic appearance for Kelley (Beijing and London) and the second for Courtney (London). But this one was different, for both.

The sisters each secured a bronze medal four years ago in London for the U.S. in team epee, perhaps adding some expectations and undue pressure before the Rio games.

"I feel like I took (the Rio competition) too seriously, I put too much pressure on it and didn't have fun like I did in London," explained Courtney, a 2013 Notre Dame graduate who is already working toward the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

"The Olympics are a totally different tournament and hopefully I can learn from this and handle the pressure better

Amanda Polk (first row, middle) is the first Notre Dame rowing alumnae to compete in the Olympics and win a gold medal.



Molly Huddle (second from left).



in the future.”

Family is also keeping Kelley, a 2010 Notre Dame graduate, on a training schedule that she hopes will take her to Tokyo for a fourth Olympic appearance.

“The reason I have kept at it for so long is because my sister (Courtney) is right there beside me, especially in such an individual sport like fencing,” Kelley said. “I don’t know anyone who handles sports or anything else in life without having that constant positive influence with you all the time.”

As a 2016 Notre Dame graduate, Margaret Bamgbose was one the youngest former Irish athletes in Rio, and she made good with a semifinal appearance in the 400-meter dash.

Competing for Nigeria, Bamgbose’s time of 51.92 was good enough for a seventh-place finish in her semifinal heat, a satisfying result and a terrific memory to cap the three weeks she spent in Rio.

“I was happy to have made it to the second round, but I wish I would’ve run faster in the semifinal race,” said Bamgbose, who finished fourth in the nation at the 2016 NCAA Championships during her final race for Notre Dame.

“I think what would have made my trip even more satisfying is if I could’ve run a PR (personal record) or come closer to my PR, but it was a great experience. I wouldn’t trade it for anything.”

Todd Burlage is a free-lance writer based in South Bend.

RIO RECAP

Five former Notre Dame student-athletes won medals at the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

Ten former and current Notre Dame athletes participated in the games, as well as two other alumni who served as

coaches. The Irish Olympians are being celebrated this weekend as part of Notre Dame-Stanford football festivities.

Here is an alphabetical recap of how the 12 Notre Dame representatives fared in Rio.

*NATALIE ACHONWA (2014)

Women’s Basketball

The former Irish women’s basketball star and current center for the Indiana Fever of the WNBA competed with the Canada women’s basketball team. Canada made the quarterfinals of the tournament before losing to France 68-63. Achonwa scored six points in Canada’s 81-51 loss to the U.S. in group play.

*MARGARET BAMGBOSE (2016) Women’s Track and Field

Bamgbose competed for Nigeria in the women’s 400-meter dash and qualified for the semifinal heat, where she finished seventh in 51.92 seconds. Bamgbose placed fourth in the nation at the 2016 NCAA Championships in her final race for Notre Dame.

*MOLLY HUDDLE (2006)

Women’s Track and Field

Huddle had a strong start to her Olympic season, winning both the 5,000 meters and the 10,000 meters at the U.S. Olympic team trials in Eugene, Oregon. In Rio, Huddle broke an American record in the 10,000 meters while finishing sixth overall at 30:13.17 in the fastest 10,000-meter race in Olympic history.

*COURTNEY HURLEY (2013)

Women’s Fencing (epee)

Hurley won a bronze medal in the women’s team epee in London four years ago. She lost in the round of 32 in Rio during the individual competition. In the team epee, Hurley and the U.S. defeated South Korea for fifth place overall.

*KELLEY HURLEY (2010)

Women’s Fencing (epee)

Like her sister, Kelley Hurley won a bronze medal in team epee at the London Olympics four years ago. Competing in her third Olympics at Rio with the U.S., Hurley was defeated in the round of 32 in the individual epee competition and placed fifth in the team event alongside her sister Courtney.

*LEE KIEFER (ENROLLED)

Women’s Fencing (foil)

Kiefer was the only current student-athlete from Notre Dame who competed in the Rio games. Kiefer is a three-time NCAA champion and did not fence for the Irish this past season in order to concentrate on her Olympic training. Kiefer advanced to the round of 16, where she was defeated by Liu Yongshi of China.

*GEREK MEINHARDT (2013 & 2015)

Men’s Fencing (foil)

Meinhardt wrapped up in Rio his third Olympic appearance with a bronze medal in men’s team foil. In the bronze-medal match versus Italy, Meinhardt won two of his three matches

by a combined score of 17-7. In the men’s individual foil competition, Meinhardt lost in the quarterfinals.

*AMANDA POLK (2008)

Women’s Rowing

Polk took home a gold medal as a member of the U.S. women’s eight team. The U.S. won the gold medal race in 6:01.49, while Great Britain and Romania took silver and bronze, respectively. Though Polk has been with the U.S. women’s rowing team since 2009, this was her first Olympic competition after being named an alternate for the 2012 games in London.

*MELISSA TANCREDI (2005)

Women’s Soccer

Tancredi took home a bronze medal for Canada when the Canadians bested host nation Brazil 2-1 in the bronze-medal match. Tancredi, a three-time Olympian, played in the match and had a header attempt on goal blocked.

*MARIEL ZAGUNIS

Women’s Fencing (sabre)

A four-time Olympic veteran, this former Notre Dame student-athlete won the first women’s gold in fencing for the U.S. at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens and was the U.S. flag bearer for the 2012 London Games.

In the women’s team sabre event in Rio, Zagunis and the U.S. won the bronze medal over Italy, with Zagunis winning all three of her bouts by a combined score of 15-9. Zagunis lost in the round of 16 to Russia’s Yekaterina Dyachenko in the individual sabre event.

With her bronze medal in the team sabre, Zagunis tied Alex Wilson, a 1932 graduate and track and field athlete (and later the longtime Notre Dame track and field head coach), for the most medals by a Notre Dame Olympian at four. Zagunis has two golds and two bronze, while Wilson won one silver and three bronze.

*ANGIE (HARRIS) AKERS (1998) — Coach,

Women’s Beach Volleyball

Akers experienced her first Olympics as a member of the Netherlands’ beach volleyball coaching staff. The Dutch team of Madelein Meppelink and Marleen Van Iersel advanced to the round of 16 in the tournament.

*MONTY WILLIAMS (1994)

Coach, Men’s Basketball

Williams was an assistant coach with the U.S. men’s basketball team and helped that unit take home a gold medal after a 96-66 defeat of Serbia. Williams was the head coach of the New Orleans Pelicans for five years before serving as an assistant coach for the Oklahoma City Thunder last season. The gold in Rio was the third straight for the U.S. men’s basketball team.