

Albanian rowers at home in Italy

Albania and Italy may seem worlds apart, but just a stretch of water, the 50km Strait of Otranto, separate them. Now rowing has brought a greater connection. Albanian rowing is solely in Italy.

It all began seven years ago when a recent immigrant from Albania to Italy, Ilda Theka, decided to take up rowing. This was the same year that Italy hosted the World Rowing Championships in Milan (in 2003) and local rowing enthusiast, Antonio Bassi, noted that there were no Albanian rowers at the championships. Bassi had met Theka who was rowing at the Moto Guzzi Rowing Club in Mandello del Lario, Italy, and with the support of Coach Franco Zucchi they looked at establishing Albanian rowing in Italy.

Although there are a few rowing clubs in Albania, they have no Olympic boats. A national federation has been established, but it is relatively inactive and is run through the Albanian Olympic Committee. The standard rowing in Albania, at this stage,

remains slim. Theka says there are a couple of lakes that may be useful – particularly a small artificial lake in the middle of the capital, Tirana – but it would have to start from scratch.

“When I tell people in Albania that I row they are surprised,” says Theka. “But now I notice that there is more interest than before.”

Since Theka started rowing, Albanian rowing in Italy has grown to include Theka’s brother Edy. Edy took up the sport in 2006 and has already participated in the World Rowing Junior Championships and the 2008 World Rowing Under 23 Championships. Recently he has been joined by Marsel Nikaj and last year the duo rowed together in the under-23 double.

Nikaj was born in Shkodeer, Albania, and now lives in Varese, one of Italy’s top rowing spots. The small core of Albanians has further been joined by Andi Cuko. Cuko, 20, resides in Verbania, Italy but was born in Fier, Albania.

The rowers met through competing at Italian regattas and Zucchi encouraged them to connect as a group. Theka says that 2009 was an important year for the Albanian team as the small group doubled in size to four. >

Marsel Nikaj of Albania competing in the men’s single sculls at the 2009 World Rowing Junior Championships in Brive-la-Gaillarde, France.



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> All of the rowers ended up in Italy after their families made the move to Italy hoping for better education and jobs. Albanian immigration to Italy is not uncommon. The poor economic state of Albania and the proximity of the two nations have meant many Albanians have left their country, mainly since the collapse of the communist regime in the early 1990s. It is estimated that about 350,000 Albanians have migrated to Italy. About 3.6 million people remain in Albania.

Bassi says there is often a negative stereotype of Albanians in Italy. "But," he says, "these guys [rowers] are setting a good, positive example."

"Now we are trying to organise ourselves as a real team," says Theka. "Some years ago it was only me, and now there are three more rowers. Unfortunately I am very busy with my school and I don't have free time to train every day but I am very happy to follow the new Albanian Rowing Team as team manager."

"We don't meet too often because we live far from each other," adds Theka. "Last year three rowers met in different rowing clubs. But this year Edi, Marsel and Andi will meet more often."

Since the Albanians in Italy started rowing they have made the news in Albania and Theka says there is now a small awareness of rowing in the country. "Some newspapers have written about the participation of the Albanian rowing team at the Mediterranean Games last year," says Theka. "They explained how we moved to Italy with our families, the school we are attending and when and how we started rowing here in Italy."

"It may be a funny story," says Bassi, "but we are very serious."

■ M.S.B.

Andi Cuko of Albania racing in the men's single sculls at the 2008 World Rowing Senior & Junior Championships in Ottensheim, near Linz, Austria.

