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Tenacious Z

SPRINT KAYAKER RAMI ZUR HAS TRIUMPHED OVER INJURY AND IS STILL ONE OF AMERICA'S BEST BETS FOR A FLATWATER MEDAL

BY JOE JACKSON

Days after Rami Zur placed 10th in the K-1 500-meter flatwater sprint at his second Olympic Games in Athens, he dove into the shallow end of his hotel pool and broke his neck. The injury threatened to paralyze him and required a surgery that fused his C5 and C6 vertebrae. Five weeks after the surgery, however, he was back in the water. Three months after that he battled the notoriously high winds and large swells of Hawaii's Molokai Channel and finished the crossing. Now, nearly four years later, the 31-year-old hopes to apply this type of tenacity to bring the U.S. a medal in the K-1 500-meter race.



One month after he was born in Berkely, California, an Israeli couple adopted him as their son and raised him on a kibbutz near the Sea of Galilee, where he found his passion for paddling. Racing for Israel in the 2000 Sydney Games, Zur reached the semifinals in the K2 500 and 1000 with partner Rои Yellin. In 2001 Zur visited the Olympic training Center in Chula Vista, California, met with the coaching staff, and decided to join the U.S. Olympic squad.

"I moved to the U.S. because I wanted to pursue my athletic career, where if I stayed in Israel this would not be possible financially," says Zur.

"Unfortunately the priorities in Israel are different, and sports is not at the top of the list."

"In Olympic events he is a top-five threat any day of the week," says Nathan Luce, U.S. Canoe/Kayak sprint head coach who has been training Zur for Beijing since January.

Zur has earned one gold and three bronze medals at World Cup events. His most recent World Cup success, in Zegreb, Croatia, qualified one of the first guaranteed U.S. kayak sprint spots in the Beijing Games. Competing in a race in which mere tenths of a second separate podium-standers from non-medalists, anyone consistently finishing in the top five has a legitimate shot at a medal, depending on the race he has.

"Every race has crazy margins, so you have to make sure everything goes right," says Zur. "And a little bit of luck helps."

Despite qualifying the position for the U.S., his road to the games is not without its obstacles. Zur sustained his first U.S. defeat in the 500 when a 21-year-old Georgian named Morgan House outpaddled him at the U.S. Olympic trials in Oklahoma City last April.

"I was really excited, I almost couldn't believe it," says House. This gives House the opportunity to take the Olympic position if he beats Zur again at the World Cup in Szeged Hungary. As this article goes to print, that upset is still in the realm of possibilities. House trained with Zur in the weeks leading up to their final pre-Games showdown, and while Zur admitted that the competition helps him in practice, he remains completely self-focused during races.

"I try to race with myself; the less I pay attention to other racers the better I do," he says. "If you asked me who was next to me in the [Athens] Olympics I couldn't tell you."

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Zur fighting through it at the Olympic Trials in Oklahoma City.

