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GOOD AS GOLD

**ROWER
CHARLOTTE
BUCK '18
HEADS TO
THE PARIS
OLYMPICS**

ROAR, LION, ROAR

Charlotte Buck '18 Rows for the Gold *By Charles Butler '85, JRN'99*

The Columbia women's crew record holder is heading to Paris with Team USA

Charlotte Buck '18 may have been halfway across the globe, but her parents, Sharon Quayle and Roger Buck, were keeping a close watch on her. Their challenge: At a crucial moment in their daughter's life, they could do nothing to help her.

On that July evening in 2021, they stared at a TV screen in a raucous bar in Nyack, N.Y., as Buck and her seven teammates, competing in the Tokyo Olympics' eight-women rowing final, stroked and stroked and stroked some more, desperate to catch the three boats ahead of their American crew. The United States had dominated this event for years, winning

gold in 2008, 2012 and 2016. That domination was now in jeopardy on the waters of Tokyo Bay.

Before the race began, Roger, and Sharon, who graduated from VPS in 1988, kept their expectations for the team — and their daughter, competing in her first Olympics — guarded. "There was a good chance they would medal," Roger, a geophysics professor at Columbia since 1984, recalls during a recent conversation. Sharon cuts in, "A good chance, but no guarantee."

As the race drew to a close, so did the cheering in the bar. The American boat ended up in fourth. There would be no victory, no medal. Sharon and Roger, clad in matching white T-shirts emblazoned

with a crimson rising sun, looked blankly at the screen. In a few hours they would take a phone call from the younger of their two daughters. "She was pretty crushed," Sharon says. Were there tears? "Yes."

Three years later, Charlotte Buck has turned disappointment into resolve. This summer, at the Paris Olympics, she will once again be on the American rowing team, and this time she won't need to phone home. Her parents and her older sister, Suzanna '14, expect to be at the Vaires-sur-Marne Nautical Stadium, rooting her on. If all goes according to plan, they'll see Buck and her teammates reclaim their sport's top podium position. "I've ticked off the box and become an Olympian," Buck says, "but I want to medal. I'd really like a gold medal."

Such a lofty goal would have seemed ludicrous when Buck entered the College. She joined crew as a walk-on. "The reason I did it was to have friends; it wasn't to be the best," Buck says, smiling. Athletics had played only a bit part while growing up in Nyack. She was known mostly for performing in a children's Shakespeare company. Her parents call her bookish; Sam Warren '13, the Columbia crew's associate head coach, doesn't disagree. "I don't want to call her a nerd because I know she'll get mad at me, but she is not your average Olympic athlete," Warren says.

If Buck's résumé was thin — she began rowing a month before Orientation — her presence was hard to miss. Six feet tall and broad-shouldered, she had the specs for the sport. She soon showed she also had the stamina — surviving the 6 a.m. practices, the commute to the 218th Street boathouse, the frigid training on the Harlem River — and the strength for it. In fact, Buck owns the Columbia women's record for doing a 2,000m row



Buck at fall practice at the Caspersen Rowing Center at Mercer Lake in New Jersey.

DIEDRE M'CLOUGHLIN

EAMON GLAVIN



At the Olympic village during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, left to right: Katelin Guregian (coxswain), Kristine O'Brien, Meghan Musnicki, Regina Salmons, Olivia Coffey, Brooke Mooney, Gia Doonan, Buck and Jess Thoennes.

in 6:49. “When she was able to break 7 minutes pretty easily, that’s when we knew [of her potential],” says Warren, who coached Buck during her junior and senior years. “That really separates you from most post-college-level students.”

Buck acknowledges that rowing provided an outlet for her strength and competitive nature. A subtlety of the sport, though, stirred her obsession. “When you’re rowing well and it feels perfect and you’re in time with all your teammates, nothing feels better. It feels almost magical,” Buck says. “I always keep chasing that moment of perfection.”

After graduation, Buck had more chase in her. For much of the next two years, she trained mostly on her own. The work paid off when she won a spot on the Tokyo squad, becoming just the second Columbia woman to make an Olympic rowing team. (The other was Stacey Borgman BC’98 in 2004.) The day Buck learned she and her teammates were Olympians, “tears streamed down our faces. It was sheer relief and excitement and just exhaustion. I called my college coaches, my parents, everyone. I was like, ‘Guys, I made it!’”

The American team’s medal-less finish in Tokyo brought tears of a different kind, but at just 26, Buck knew she still had more Olympic opportunities. She helped to ensure that last summer, at the World Championships in Belgrade, Serbia. Six boats competed in the women’s 2,000m eight race; the top five would qualify for

Paris. Even though the U.S. boat was a favorite, it was stuck in last place through the first third of the race. Nobu Ishizuka ’82, LAW’86, a former Columbia rower and now president of USRowing, was in Belgrade and witnessed the race unfold.

“Because of the mass that has to get moving and the endurance needed to keep your speed,” Ishizuka explains, “races are usually decided, at least in terms of medals, within 250 to 500 meters of the start.” But he watched as the American boat “clawed” its way through the last 500 meters to get the silver medal and an Olympic bid. “That is virtually unheard of, especially in an eight-race of any level.” Positioned in the stroke seat, Buck was the one setting the come-from-behind pace.

Weeks later, at a banquet in New York City, Ishizuka had the chance to talk with Buck about the comeback. “How in the world did you do that?” he asked. “We just had the confidence,” she told him. “We knew we could do it even when we were so far behind.”

The World Championships finish secured the American boat’s place in Paris. Like her teammates, though, Buck would not know for seven months if she had nailed her own Olympic spot. That meant more 6 a.m. practices, weeks of high-altitude training and daily assessments from coaches — all while holding down a part-time sales analyst job with a fintech company. The reward came in April when Buck got the news: Her



EAMON GLAVIN

Buck (right) with coxswain Nina Castagna on Mercer Lake.

coaches had selected her for the American team. “It’s crazy, it’s ridiculous,” she says. “My mom keeps telling me that I used to be a couch potato. What happened? I don’t know. Sometimes you just keep putting one foot in front of the other and you end up an Olympian. Nobody would have predicted it.”

Buck won’t know until weeks before the Games which boat — the women’s four or eight — she’ll race in. She says it doesn’t matter. She’s about to do something few walk-ons ever have the chance to do. “The most important thing is winning,” Buck says. “So wherever I’m going to help us win, that is where I want to be.” And this time, the cheering squad will be nearby.

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