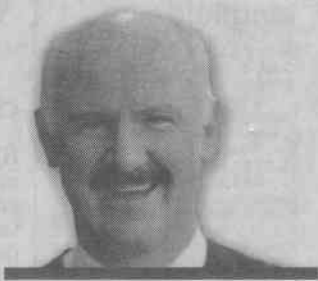


SANDY Strang



THE great Greek tragedian Aeschylus knew a thing or two about life on the edge and surviving at the outer limits. Fear, he said in "The Eumenides", is good at times; it keeps a watchful place at the heart's controls. There's advantage in wisdom won from its pain. But to be conquered fear itself must first be understood.

Enter those four rowing musketeers, Redgrave, Pinsent, Cracknell, and Foster, the Great Man and his three partners in the coxless fours for the Sydney Olympics.

Men who know all to well that courage is resistance to and mastery of fear – not its absence.

Men whose consummate mental battle is only now beginning, men wittingly submitting to a nightmarish private ordeal necessary for an assault on the impossible; a fifth successive gold medal for Redgrave. A fear unparalleled in any endurance sport.

Only Hungarian fencer Aladar Gerevich has ever achieved more, as Redgrave's crew is about to be trapped in the unremitting, unforgiving glare of worldwide focus.

Victory for these magnificent men in their rowing machine will rightly, triumphally be lauded as the ultimate single sporting achievement of his or any other era; failure cannot begin to be contemplated.

Past experience has armed them with a remarkable insight into their own fear-generated demons. They've been there before, and survived.

They can even delineate four clear phases of paralysing fear. It begins with hyperactivity: "We call it going twitchy," reveals Matthew Pinsent with the frenetic intensity of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. "You just can't sit still.

Then comes the apathetic stage when you feel utterly lethargic and nauseous, and you tend to lose your appetite. Next, you worry that your throat is sore, or you suddenly develop a headache, and you convince yourself you're very ill. That's the hypochondriac stage.

The final mind-numbing denouement is hysteria: "It's as if your body's been hijacked by an irrational panic, an engulfing paranoia. As I waited in the marquee for the first heat of the last Olympics in Atlanta, I was feeling

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quietly nervous but in control.

Then suddenly, inexplicably my body, 6ft 5 in and 16 stones, went off at a tangent. I lost it. Big time. Involuntarily I threw up, and had to lie down and curl up, until, gradually, the agitation passed."

Even the indestructible Redgrave, god No 1 on the ethereally rarefied apex of Mount Olympus, isn't immune: "It tends to hit me only when I'm outside the boat. When I'm in it I feel fine, I'm in my natural element, I'm in charge, and I know what I'm doing."

In his singularly obsessive, madly-driven way he has ceaselessly pushed back the boundaries for us all. Each Olympian height conquered, going back to 1984, has been regarded as only a prequel to the next, a bogus hill obscuring a higher one beyond. It is this restless demonic desire to strive beyond the conventionally feasible which strikes a salient chord in everyone.

Absurdly, paradoxically the whole Redgrave scenario has to an extent transcended the individual himself: the question whether he personally can do it has ceased to matter; it's whether anybody at all can do it.

There's a rivetingly inspirational message in Redgrave attempting to tilt at the ultimate sporting windmill. Don Quixote in a four-man boat. To anyone who might feel that sport is in danger of becoming dehumanised and banalised by the overshadowing attentions of corporate sponsors and multi-national broadcasting institutions, Redgrave gives the lie.

His is the definitive assertion that sport is still about human triumph and disaster, its essence still capable of surviving £40,000-a-week wage packets, high-tech equipment, widespread drug-taking and utterly pernicious match-fixing.

His continuing defiance of the constraining rules governing most other mortals represents an awe-inspiring return to a gloriously untainted sporting purity and innocence.

"If anybody sees me in a boat again", he proclaimed after winning his fourth gold, they can shoot me." Ignore him. Put away the rifles now. Joyously. And book your viewer's seat for Penrith Lakes, Sydney, late autumn 2000. Sponsored by heaven. Driven by fear. Redgrave versus Everest. Round Five. Immortality beckons.

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