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The Kiwi canoe crew so bad they got sympathetic cheers at the Olympics

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Dana Johannsen, in Paris



Max Brown and Grant Clancy from New Zealand in the men's canoe double 500m. Photo: Iain McGregor / www.photosport.nz

The confusion was almost immediate.

"Why didn't the New Zealand crew go when the gun went off?" quizzed a member of the international press as heat one of the men's C2 500m event got under way on the Vaire-sur-Marne course in Paris.

While their rivals charged off the line in a brutal display of power, the Kiwi duo of Max Brown and Grant Clancy appeared to be struggling to even get going.

And that was the last that was seen of the pair - in television coverage anyway. In farcical scenes, they went on to finish more than 46 seconds - or around 200 metres - behind the winners of the 500m race.

The New Zealand crew weren't just off the pace in the men's field - their time of 2:22.09 would have placed them last by more than 10 seconds in the women's C2 500m.



The Kiwi pair were soon a distant last. Photo: Iain McGregor / www.photosport.nz

They returned later for the quarterfinal race and were again well off the pace. By this stage, the sizeable crowd packed in for day one of the canoe sprint programme had got behind the Kiwi combination, offering generous applause and cheers in scenes reminiscent of 'Eric the Eel' - the Equatoguinean swimmer, whose 100m freestyle time at the Sydney Olympics remains the slowest in history.

But these were not athletes from a developing nation getting the opportunity to compete on the biggest stage. Canoe Racing NZ (CRNZ) received high performance funding to the tune of more than \$2.5 million per year.

That money has been used to build a strong flatwater kayak racing programme. The event Brown and Clancy were racing in on Tuesday was much different.

In a kayak, the paddler is seated and uses a double-bladed paddle pulling the blade through the water on alternate sides to move forward. In a canoe, the paddler kneels and uses a single-bladed paddle to propel the boat forward.

It's a discipline New Zealand has no pedigree in, and it is rarely seen at club level around the country.

A means to an end

How New Zealand came to be racing in an event that it had no hope of being competitive in lies in the quirks of the international body's qualification rules for the Olympics.

At the start of the Olympic cycle, Canoe Racing NZ (CRNZ) circled the men's K4 as the event it wanted to prioritise for these Games.

The only problem was, New Zealand did not manage to directly qualify the four-man boat for Paris at last year's world championships.

CRNZ had hoped to secure two K2 Olympic quota spots - which would have allowed it to select four athletes - at the Oceania Championships in Sydney, but only gained one via Kurtis Imrie and Max Brown.

So the national body went to plan C - or plan C2. At the Oceania event, a further two quota spots were up for grabs in the canoeing discipline, so long as there were a minimum of three boats in the race.

New Zealand narrowly won the race against a Samoan combination and a hastily thrown together local Australian crew made up of a 70 year-old and a 60-something.

CRNZ then used those four quota spots to form a K4 crew.

In short, this boat was a means to an end.

But some within the canoe racing community and media on the shores of the Vaires-sur-Marne course have questioned the ethics of CRNZ's qualification strategy.

The tactic of manipulating the quota system to prioritise a boat that failed to qualify through the conventional route was also raised in the Sports Tribunal, after CRNZ turned down its quota spot in the K1 1000m earned by Quaid Thompson.



The men's K4 - Max Brown, Grant Clancy, Kurtis Imrie and Hamish Legarth - in their heat at the Vaires-sur-Marne course near Paris on 6 August. Photo: Iain McGregor / www.photosport.nz

Thompson appealed CRNZ's decision, but it was dismissed by the tribunal in April.

Brown accepts the way CRNZ went about it was "a little bit different", but believes the team's results in the K4 on Tuesday, when they secured a place in the semifinal, proves New Zealand deserves to have a big boat at the Olympic Games.

"We used Kiwi ingenuity to qualify the K4 that we were so close to at the world champs, and it always comes back to that," said Brown, who competed in four races on Tuesday.

"In the end, no rules have been broken. We've followed the process the whole time.

"I think we proved in our quarterfinal of the K4 that New Zealand deserved to have a K4 here. And so it has always come back to that - I'm doing the C2 so that we can have our chance in the K4."

A completely different sport

Having had just three months to learn the difficult discipline before racing in front of a global television audience on sport's grandest stage, Clancy and Brown were relieved to have completed the course twice without any mishaps.

Clancy, who steered the canoe at the back, described the canoeing discipline as "a completely different sport" to kayaking.

"The main challenge we've found going from kayak to canoe is that there is no rudder, so the hardest part is actually steering. It's all done with the paddle and you don't have those skills in kayak because you just use the rudder to steer ... so that was our biggest challenge, staying in our lane."

Brown said it is also tough on the body.

"When I got out of the boat at the end of that last race, I couldn't feel my right leg and I actually fell over, it was so numb. That's the hardest part, it's so one-sided, whereas kayak is really symmetrical. So it's been really tough on the legs, my poor booty - I've been working really hard in the gym to make it strong enough."

Having had a big workload on the opening day of racing on Tuesday with four races - two each in the C2 and K4 - Brown said he was looking forward to a rest on Wednesday before they are back in action in the semifinals for the K4.

Brown and Clancy also have one further appearance in the C2 500m to come in the B final on Thursday.



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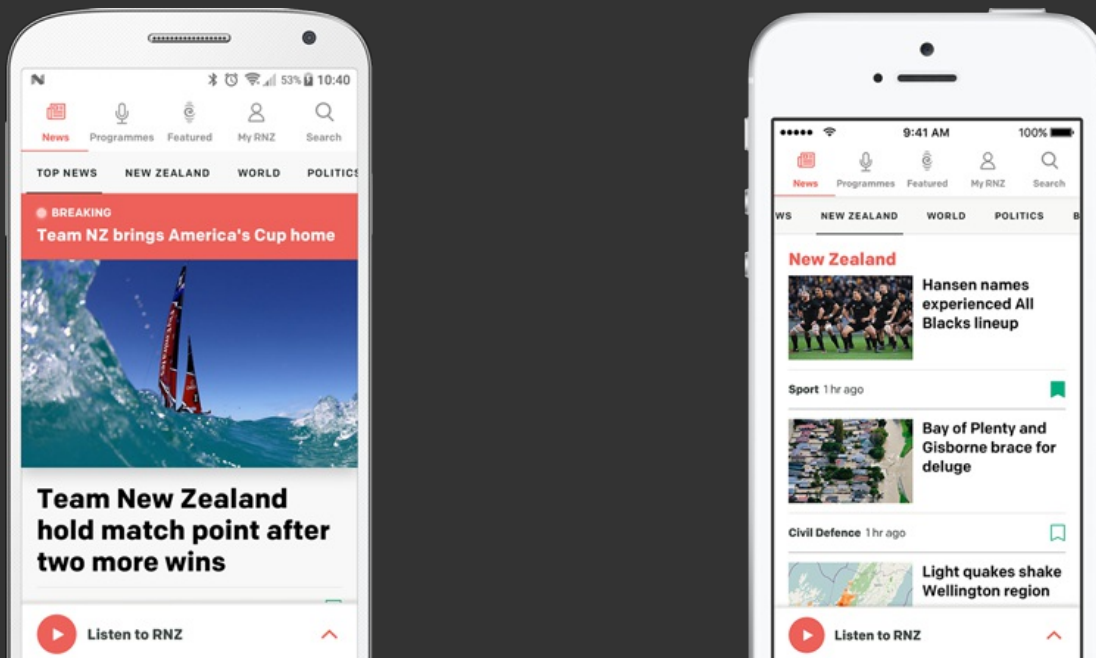
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