



The 2012 Olympics may be some way off, says **Ben Collins**, but there are already high hopes for British rowers after the U20 squad got the year off to a thrilling start at the Australian Youth Olympic Festival in Sydney. Images courtesy of **Empics**.

# Topping the Medal Table



**T**he bi-annual Australian Youth Olympic Festival (AYOF) event, organised by the Australian Olympic Committee, is a legacy of the 2000 Games in Sydney. Athletes stay in the Olympic Village, and compete in an Olympic-style format at former Olympic venues such as Penrith Lake – the scene of Sir Steve Redgrave's historic fifth Olympic Gold in 2000.

The fourth AYOF was held in January and the British Olympic Association (BOA) was invited to enter a team for the first time as it sets out to develop young British athletes into potential medal winners at London 2012.

Gaining experience was the primary objective with many of GB's Olympic hopefuls enjoying their first taste of a multi-sport event, while our emerging rowers sampled a new opportunity to bridge the gap between the junior ranks (U18s) and the U23 level.

Team GB – made up of 112 athletes in 11 sports

– managed to post encouraging results across the board, but it was the rowers that really stole the show, with the 18-strong squad claiming six Golds, five Silvers and a Bronze to top the medal table ahead of Australia, New Zealand and China.

That made rowing Team GB's most successful

The British rowers faced unfamiliar opposition, a busy programme (the heats and finals for each of the six classes were held over just two days) and intense heat, with temperatures soaring beyond 40°C.

Yet GB coped admirably having undergone two weeks of training in Australia before the

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sport at the event and the results were particularly impressive given that GB U23 coach Peter Sheppard – team leader in Sydney – admitted before the competition that it was “a bit of an unknown.”

festival, although the early arrival was as much about team-building as acclimatisation – sightseeing trips and get-togethers with the rest of Team GB were also on the itinerary.

Each rower competed in three boat classes



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and Stephanie Mottram was the stand-out performer by claiming Gold in each of her events; the Women's Single Scull, the Women's Quadruple Scull and the Women's Eight.

There was also Gold for the Women's Four of Vicky Bryant, Rosanna Collings, Stephanie McDowell and Jacqui Round who – with cox Zoe de Toledo – joined the Quadruple Scull of Mottram, Rachael Jeffries, Emma Steel and women's captain Frances Fletcher to triumph in the Women's Eight.

The men claimed two Golds and four Silvers, with 2006 World Junior Gold medalists Tom Lucy and Nathaniel Reilly O'Donnell – the men's captain – almost emulating Mottram's treble. They took Gold in the Men's Pairs, with Silver snatched by fellow World Junior Gold medalist Lewis Beech and emerging talent Mohammed Sbihi, who was discovered by the ARA's World Class Start programme (sponsored by Siemens).

The two pairs joined forces to win Gold in the Men's Four and were then joined by cox Sebastian Stuart and the Quadruple Scull of Chris Boddy, Bob Hewitt, Martin Haymes and Nick Fearnhead for the Men's Eight. Leading midway through the final, wind chopped up the water and the GB crew caught a crab, forcing them to stop, although they recovered from fourth to clinch Silver.

Overall, the AYOF was a resounding success for GB Rowing, and performance director David Tanner paid tribute to the team's achievements: "Our rowers have done us proud with a great run of medals and we're pleased to have topped the medal table," he

said. "They have shown real mettle in the hot and challenging conditions.

"GB Rowing owes thanks to the British Olympic Association, who have organised such a good competition environment for our team. Equally, praise is due to the Australian Olympic Committee for their great initiative in setting up the Festival."

The BOA will now be hoping they will be rewarded with a spate of rowing medals at London 2012, although on this showing they could even be getting a few extra as soon as Beijing 2008 arrives. ■

