

*Canoeing / Kayaking*

## Distracted Walsh left unhappy in the extreme with silver

From Ashling O'Connor in Athens

WITH an Olympic silver medal, Campbell Walsh has a credible excuse to offer examiners at Nottingham University for missing resits in his masters degree in information technology. There will be no lame pretexts about the dog eating revision notes or being felled by a previously unknown strain of flu. The Scot has the television footage to prove that his quest for Great Britain's second canoeing medal of the Games was of more service to the nation than swelling the already numerous ranks of computer experts.

A gold, which was well within his grasp had he not eased back at the finish thinking that he had won, would have made for an even better sicknote. However, Benoit Peschier, of France, was intent on being top of the slalom kayaking class in a thrilling climax for a capacity crowd of 8,000 around the 270-metre saltwater course, built at a cost of \$26 million (about £14 million) on the site of the old Athens airport.

As close as the Olympics gets to extreme sports, kayaking is rewarding the IOC handsomely for its reintroduction in Atlanta. "Having watched some other events before I started, they were nowhere nearly as exciting as this," Walsh said. "It looked brilliant on TV. I think it should raise the profile."

The 26-year-old from Stirlingshire, who took up the sport when he was 10 after realising that he was too small for rugby, played his part in a tremendous spectacle. The fastest semi-finalist after flying through the 20 gates in a clear run of 1min 33.68sec, his aggressive style underlined how exciting the sport is to watch. Walsh led Peschier by 0.25sec and appeared to have the better of the course, apart from a slight struggle to exit the surging wave between gates 17 and 18. The last of the finalists to descend, with Peschier and Fabien Lefevre, his countryman, in first and second places, Walsh failed to take the course as well the second time, running into trouble at the first large drop at gate five.

"I was off the start line going for the gold," he said. "I came out and there was a large wave you go through. I'm the lightest guy in the field, so if I hit a wave like that head-on, then they do tend to stop me more than the other guys."

His clear run of 96.49sec might have been faster were it not for the American commentator yelling over the guitar chords of Desire, by U2 — the song chosen by the venue's DJ for Walsh's final outing. "I thought I heard the commentator say I was in the lead coming up to the finish, so I eased off," he said. "I'm not happy with that. I kind of thought I had it in the bag, but it turns out I was nowhere near it, so I am a bit disappointed."

Initially it had looked even worse. When Campbell first caught sight of the scoreboard, he could not see his name near the top. Then it appeared that he had got the bronze behind Peschier and Lefevre. But, in a similar turn of events to the one that handed Helen Reeves a bronze for Britain on Wednesday, Lefevre's final time had not been recorded properly by the electronic sensors at the finish. The manual back-up timer put him third, behind Walsh, after adding a two-second penalty on the third gate.

There was disappointment for Britain in the Canadian C2 canoe class. Stuart Bowman and Nicholas Smith did not qualify for the final after coming tenth in their semi-final.