

# British duo make strong case

Olympic veteran and prodigy join forces for Beijing

By Gareth A Davies

ANNA HEMMING'S accepts that the tag of "old and new, borrowed and blue" could be applied to her on route to Beijing. The 31-year-old Olympic veteran is teaming up with teenager Jessica Walker, the youngest woman ever to compete in flatwater racing at the Olympic Games, in the women's K2 500 metres event.

Hemmings, a six-time world champion in marathon canoe racing, joins Walker, a prodigy who has just turned 18, in the 500m kayak sprint event which takes place at the regatta centre outside central Beijing. Old and new they may be, but both are formidable athletes.

Hemmings, half-Honduran, half-British, is tough, physically strong and has the kind of bearing which could lead men into war. If she were not a sportswoman, she might have made an expert female military leader.

Invited to speak at a lower sixth form leadership conference at Harrow School by director of sport Roger Utley, a few years ago, Hemmings was happy to put out a challenge to the boys who were there, asking if anyone could do more press-ups in 60 seconds than she could. There were no volunteers but one boy, a member of the rugby XV.

Hemmings beat him 75 to 52 over the minute. The boys had a new sporting heroine, but Hemmings took those opportunities to remind those present that their school-mate because he had accepted the challenge.

Back to borrowed and



New combination: Jessica Walker (front) and Anna Hemmings team up

blue. Why? Hemmings revealed to *The Daily Telegraph* yesterday that she is to marry straight after the Olympics, and will head off on honeymoon.

She also enthused about her role in bringing on her teenage kayak partner. "You get good-level juniors, but less is outstanding, and it's already at a high level in the seniors," Hemmings said.

She's brilliant, a real prodigy. The only difference with Jess is in terms of her not having

as much experience as me, but in competition and in training, she is as good as anyone in the British team."

Walker was in great form last weekend, winning gold and silver medals at 1000m and 500m, respectively, in the K1 event at the junior and under-23 European Championships in Szeged, Hungary. Walker said she was thrilled to be going to the Games, "especially at such a young age".

Hemmings has been

involved in motivational speaking for some time, following a profound low in her life. Five years ago, she had a mystery illness.

suffering constant tiredness and lack of motivation which was eventually diagnosed as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.

As a result, she lost her Lottery funding, missed the Athens Games, and went in search of a cure, ultimately realising that she needed a lifestyle change. Following

treatment for the syndrome, Hemmings went on to win two further world marathon canoe titles.

Hemmings competed at the Sydney Olympics in 2000, where she reached the semi-finals in the K1 500m, but this time around with Walker is gunning for special races.

Knowing her you would not rule out Hemmings producing a remarkable performance in Beijing and returning with a medal.

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