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# NordicLight

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## Countdown to Rio 2016 Olympic Games

**Lars Björkström, Olympic Gold  
Medalist and Swede of the Year**



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# Interview with Olympic Gold Medalist *Lars Björkström*

*In light of the upcoming Rio 2016 Summer Olympics in August, “NordicLight” recently interviewed Olympic Gold Medalist Lars Björkström, a long-time Swedcham member. Born in Sweden and naturalized Brazilian, Lars teamed up with Brazilian Alex Welter in the historic conquest of the gold medal in the Tornado Class in the 1980 Moscow Olympics—which marked the first gold medal in sailing for Brazil and put an end to a 24-year period without any Olympic Gold for this country (until then, the last Olympic champion had been Adhemar Ferreira da Silva, who won in the triple jump class in the 1956 Melbourne Olympics).*

Born in Gothenburg and raised in Stockholm, sailing was almost compulsory,” he said. “Thousands of islands and tranquil waters certainly invite the population to travel or compete by boat.” Lars revealed that when he was 12, his father sent him to a camp and gave him a boat, “which later ‘extended’ my studies at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology by more than a year.”

In the early 1970s, Lars and a friend decided to go on a trip by motorcycle without any specific destination (or “*sem destino*” in Portuguese, the Brazilian title for the famous film “Easy Rider”), leaving California en route to Latin America. “After a year going through 17 countries, we decided to try Brazil, at the time under the Medici Administration and before the oil crisis,” Lars recalled.

“My first job was at a construction company in São Paulo, and after helping a Swede who wanted to set up a construction company in Resende, he offered to bring me something from Sweden when he moved to Brazil in 1975. I asked for a Tornado Olympic boat, which I had helped introduce in Sweden. My uncle, a sailor in Gothenburg, readily organized one to send over!”

Lars had already participated in some regattas in Guarujá through Erik Svedelius’s nephew and namesake, who helped him put the boat in the São Paulo Yacht Club on the Guarapiranga Reservoir, where it was seen by Alex Welter, one of the best sailors in Brazil. Welter told him about a Brazilian Tornado championship in Rio de Janeiro and that the first two winners would be entitled to participate in the world championship in Australia. “This was an irresistible offer, and we immediately joined forces and won our airline tickets!” he said.

“We had an encouraging result and we decided to form a team focused on the Summer Olympics that would take place four years later in Moscow, in

Alex Welter (left) and Lars Björkström in action during the 1980 Moscow Olympics.





1980, with regattas in Tallinn in the Baltic Sea, not very far from my waters in Stockholm!"

Lars recalled that Alex was going to do his post-graduation in Munich, which would help the logistics. Europe had many Tornado regattas and there were three important pre-Olympic races in Tallinn, not very far from Germany and Sweden, where his sister had a house to keep the boat. "I managed to buy another Tornado in Stockholm, which I was only able to send to the pre-Olympic regatta in 1977 as part of the Swedish delegation, because of Soviet bureaucracy, which was similar to Brazil's only without all the good will..."

"To look Brazilian, I painted the bottom green like an alligator and the rest white, the name Jacaré was inspired by the only publication permitted to criticize the Soviet government: Krokodil. In Estonia, a local journalist was very amused and after each race he asked if Jacaré had beaten the Russians."

After their second place in the European championship in Italy at the start of the Olympic year, Lars and Alex had guaranteed their place and could concentrate on refining their skills in other regattas in France and Germany.

"We had the opportunity to fly to the opening in Moscow, a spectacle which to this day is unparalleled in Olympic Games, with the famous Misha bear (the Russian bear is a widespread symbol for Russia) and the enthusiastic audience. It was exciting to see Leonid Brezhnev at the height of the cold war. We had another opening in Tallinn, but without the bear since the Estonians preferred a seal for historic reasons."

"Well, our speed exceeded that of the recently crowned world champion, our Russian host, as well as the Danish vice-champion, and much to our surprise we won with anticipation, before the seventh (and last) race. The Swedes also managed to beat the Russians to the bronze medal, so only Alex was non-Nordic on the podium," Lars told **NordicLight**.

"The following day, two young sailors from Rio grabbed gold for the 470 Class, a small craft for lightweights that is still in the Olympics (which unfortunately isn't the case of the Tornado Class that gave two more bronze medals for Brazil, won by Lars Grael, of Danish origin)."

Lars said that after the closing ceremony, he went to see his parents in Stockholm, and saw the headline in a daily paper: *Swede won gold in the Olympics, but the Brazilian flag went up!* "When



Alex Welter and Lars Björkström receiving their well-deserved Gold Medals at the 1980 Olympic Games.

I landed in São Paulo it seemed like Carnival, but a serious congressman wanted to recruit me for his campaign against new restrictions for immigration, and a few weeks later I found myself on a platform with Franco Montoro, soon to become the governor of São Paulo. Years later, I also went to lobby in Congress to overturn a veto by José Sarney of some tax incentives for corporate investment in community sport facilities, similar to existing cultural incentives. Then came Fernando Collor and put a veto again, so I gave up my political career!"

In spite of the fact that soccer is the sport that rules in Brazil, Lars said his life changed as the country's fourth Olympic champion, "and now oldest among the living". Every time Sweden plays against Brazil, he asks himself who he is going to root for? And every Olympic year, TV stations want to know "what did it feel like?"

"I recorded a few documentaries and ran with the torch in 2004 in Rio, when the torch travelled the world to promote the Games' return to Greece," he said. Lars was invited to run with the torch again this year.

So what does Lars do these days?

"After surviving the 80s working with loss prevention for insurers of industrial risks (I spent five years at Skandia in São Paulo), I joined Aceco TI to develop the physical security market for CPDs, today known as data centers, in 1987. This was right after the fire that led to the collapse of the CESP building on Avenida Paulista, which one might say ignited my career..."

Lars is research and development director at Aceco IT, an IT infrastructure and integrated command and control centers company. "After a tenfold growth for the company between 2003 and 2013, I made a video to surf on the Olympic wave, so to speak, in which I drew parallels between the challenges of regattas and data centers. It's on the company's website."

Lars said he is still working on a "light" basis, but is very dedicated to his ecological reserve in Saco do Mamanguá, which he reaches by boat and has great winds for sailing. Mamanguá is a fjord-like bay just across the border to the state of Rio. It has many small beaches and high mountains covered with dense jungle (even Jaguars have been sighted), a perfect place to spend a weekend far from civilization, with candle light dinner and no phones. That is where he plans to live later on, with several guest houses for friends to come and visit. ■