Rock the Boat

Donald AuCoin joins the Olympic Regatta

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It didn't really sink in until one day two years ago at the rowing camp in Maine. Donald AuCoin had biked there from his home in Washington, D.C., and on the way he had taken a fall and scraped his hands badly. Still, he wouldn't let his injuries keep him from rowing -- much to the consternation of the nurse at the camp who bandaged his hands.

"You athletes are all alike," she said.

And it hit AuCoin. "She called me 'athlete.'" But then he thought, "I'm in rowing camp, with people half my age. I've bicycled up from Washington. What the hell am I if I'm not an athlete?"

When Donald was diagnosed HIV positive with Kaposi's sarcoma eight years ago, the thought that in 1996 he'd be alive and well and involved in competitive athletics would never have crossed his mind. As a child, he was the kid out in right field who could never catch a fly ball.

But in 1990, at age 40, with advanced AIDS, AuCoin took up rowing with the Washington-based gay and lesbian rowing team, D.C. Strokes. Since then much of Donald AuCoin's life has revolved around sports. This summer, having earlier applied and been chosen by the U.S. rowing team, AuCoin plans to bike down to Atlanta to take part in the Olympics as an assisting volunteer to the rowers.

Handsome, with a trim build, a short blond crewcut and a T-cell count "around 270," AuCoin looks the picture of health. "I come from sturdy French-Canadian peasant stock," he says, explaining one of the reasons why he thinks his "KS is, amazingly, slow-growing."

He points to a lacy bluish pattern above the ankle on his left leg. "Someone came up to me recently and said, 'I love the tattoo of Texas on your leg!' I said, 'It's KS,' and he went, 'Oh!' and backed away." AuCoin's boyish grin spreads across his face.

AuCoin has few illusions about his disease, and that, for him, is a source of strength. "I know that I'm going to die and I know it's going to be AIDS. I don't spend any energy pushing the reality of death out of my life."

That's where athletics comes in. "There's an immediate payoff in sports," he says. "In order to get

through without pretending there’s a long-term future, you really have to make the now make sense. And sports makes the now make sense to me.”

And now, AuCoin says with all the confidence you’d expect from an athlete, “I’m better-looking than when I was 26 even though I’ve got spots. I’m good-looking with spots.”

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