

Roland Varga joining Team Canada in Tokyo this summer

By **Robert Belardi**

Aurora resident Roland Varga will be competing in Canoe-Kayak for Team Canada in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

The news was officially made public last week and the 30-year-old was almost at a complete loss for words.

"Words can't describe it. It feels surreal. It still hasn't sunk in. 18 years of hard work -- it wasn't in vain. I'm very proud and happy to represent Canada and fulfil my dreams," Varga said effusively.

He will be heading to Japan with Nova Scotia native Connor Fitzpatrick as his partner in July.

Born in Hungary, Varga says canoe-kayaking is one of the most popular sports in the country. While in elementary school, the coach of the local club arrived in the gym with a unique recruiting method that immediately garnered the 12-year-old's attention.

"He offered one kilogram of gummy bears for whoever joins the club," Varga recalled.

"I have a sweet tooth. It was a good bargain for me. Most of my friends were already canoeing so I gravitated towards it and fell in love with it."

With a love for being outdoors and with friends, Varga instantly enjoyed being a part of the atmosphere in the club. But when push came to shove and he got behind the paddles. That was ultimately a different story at the time.

"When I first started, I wasn't very talented. My technique wasn't the best. I was pretty stubborn. I remember my first race. I came in last and started crying. I wanted it more than everyone else and I made it a goal to prove [to] myself that I belong there."

Following his loss, the coach of the local club sat Varga aside and reminded the young man that in order to win you must work hard. You must train. You must sweat every ounce of your being behind those paddles. Little did he know he was motivating a future Olympian.

In 2004, when Varga was just 14 he won his first title in Hungary. Varga finished in first place in the 1000m C4 and first place in the 500m. With the sport having originated in Canada, Varga said the initial "C" stands for Canadian and the number stands for how many paddlers in the boat.

When he turned 15, his family emigrated to Canada and resided in Richmond Hill with his uncle. While living there before moving to Aurora, he joined Team Ontario. The provincial team loved his versatility as a sprint and endurance paddler fused into one.

In the 2008, all the way to 2010 Canadian Championships, Varga finished in a podium spot in C1 and C2 1000m, 500m and 200m races.

Leading up to the Olympics in Rio 2016, Varga and his former partner Paul Bryant were notified of the news that the paddlers from Moldova had been disqualified for doping. Unfortunately, they weren't permitted to travel to Rio and the chance to represent Canada had slipped away.

Now with his partner Connor Fitzpatrick, Varga is training in Nova Scotia and he is ready to bring home a medal.

This trip to Tokyo will not be Varga's first time visiting the city. He won't be distracted by the city's vibrant bright lights and sights to see. He is pedal to the metal with his partner and no matter the obstacle and even no matter the fact he hasn't raced internationally

since 2019, they are both ready to give it everything they have.

Varga would like to personally thank Richmond Hill Canoe Club coach Igor Nikitovic and parents Helen and Bryant in supporting him throughout his career thus far.