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Canada's David Calder (left) lets out a yell after he and Scott Frandsen win their men's pair semifinal yesterday. Canada now has three boats rowing for medals.

Canucks row, row, row into the finals

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BEIJING — As the signal on the Canadian medal detector weakens at most Olympic venues in the Chinese capital, it continues to get stronger in suburban Shunyi.

Canada qualified two more boats for the weekend finals of the rowing regatta after strong rebound efforts by the men's pair and women's eight yesterday.

The two crews joined the men's eight, which is heavily favoured to bring home gold.

"As a crew, we've always got better progressively with

each race at a regatta," said first-time Olympian Heather Mandoli of the women's boat which won its semifinal after finishing third in a preliminary heat Monday. "It's something that has happened, but we don't do it intentionally."

"Our hope for the final on Sunday is to put together our best race. It was nice to get out there and feel we still have the ability to race."

Though the Canadian women were shut out of the medals in 2004 at Athens — the eight didn't even qualify for the final — the boat has been faster by the month in '08.

A mix of old and new, vet-

erans such as Buffy Williams and Darcy Marquardt, has helped them emerge as a threat to at least contend for a medal, though it will be difficult to challenge the favoured U.S. for gold.

"I think this is the closest performance to what we've been doing all summer in terms of our form," coxswain Lesley Thompson-Willie said of the solid effort in yesterday's repechage. "We're going to go out and race hard and race fast."

Earlier yesterday, it was the men's pair of David Calder and Scott Frandsen which rebounded from a sloppy

effort in its heat to take the semifinal ahead of a strong New Zealand boat. Whatever caused them to struggle in their first outing here apparently was ironed out.

"In the last three days since the heat, we've been making sure we were focused," Frandsen said. "The fear and nerves can't get to you. We stayed focused and loose."

Speaking of loose, the men's eight continued to train for its race. As Canada's first legitimate shot at reaching the top of a podium, the reigning world champions have been enjoying the luxury of a relaxed approach as they bid

to make up for a fifth-place finish four years ago.

"We're used to not getting any down time, so it's nice to be able to unwind and focus on what we have to do," captain Kyle Hamilton said. "We're not rowing as much as we do at home in Vancouver, so we have a little more time to nap and get rested up."

"I read and play a little online poker — with very, very low stakes."

Different game, but on the weekend those stakes get a whole lot higher for the country and its crews.

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