

# Our Oarsome Foursome



SA rowers wins gold through scientific approach and lots of dedication

*Text: Wilhelm de Swardt Image: Back Page Images and Reg Caldecott*

"Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways and be wise."

The question may well be asked what the relevance is between this text from Proverbs and the South African Olympic sports.

The answer is actually quite obvious.

The decision makers of all the other South African Olympic sporting codes can certainly learn from the way in which South African Rowing, with the help of the High Performance Centre (hpc) of the University of Pretoria, prepared the rowers for the Olympic Games in London.

One of the main problems of South African sports is that words like 'long-term strategy' and 'planning' hardly exist in many of the sporting codes.

Instead a 'shotgun approach' is followed. Athletes are selected in the vain hope that they just might achieve a good result. If this does not happen, there will always be another year with new opportunities.

Not so in SA rowing.

Ever since Ramon di Clementi and Donovan Cech caused a major surprise by winning a bronze medal in the Coxless Pairs Division at the 2004 Games in Athens, a definite plan has been in place for SA rowing teams to ensure that they would never merely give once-off performances.

The fact that South Africa's four-men team, consisting of Sizwe Ndlovu, John Smith, Matthew Brittain and James Thompson, won a gold medal in London, is a classic example of the success that can be achieved if

athletes and coaches are prepared to work along with sport scientists to ensure success.

This is textbook stuff that can be compared with the success that has been achieved in cycling by Britain since 2008. In both cases nothing was left to chance. It was a total team effort.

The main difference between the South African rowers and the British cyclists is the fact that, during the build-up to the Games, the British team was backed by the National Lottery with millions of pounds, while the only thing that kept the South African rowers going was their passion and pride.

Roger Barrow, national rowing coach, makes it clear that nobody anywhere in the world rows because he wants to enrich himself.

When asked what prize money a rower can expect to win at a World Cup Event, Barrow's emphatic answer was "None".

And at a World Championship?

"Also none."

It seems, therefore, that rowers just want to prove to themselves that they can be the best.

"That is correct."

During the past eight years the South African rowers, as well as the scientists at the hpc, had just one goal and that was to win at least one medal at the Games.

Lindsey Parry, a qualified biokineticist

at the hpc Sport Science & Medical Unit, and Jimmy Clark, a sport physiologist and lecturer at UP Institute for Sports Research, were just two of the scientists who went out of their way to assist the rowers.

When asked whether he was surprised that the four-men team won a gold medal in London, Clark's emphatic answer was "no".

"I was definitely not surprised. It was just a huge delight. We knew that they were in great form and the earlier rounds suggested that they had as much of a chance as anyone else at that level.

"I must admit that we did not dare to expect them to win gold."

According to Clark he feels proud and grateful that he was able to work with athletes, coaches and other support staff in the build-up to the Games.

"So many aspects contributed to the success."

It was a definite highlight for Clark to be in London when the team won the gold medal.

"I will admit that I was in tears afterwards. The victory meant so much to so many people and I knew what it had taken. So it was very emotional."

About his role in the team's success, Clark said that, put in the simplest terms, it boiled down to finding ways of making the athletes row faster.

"All the factors that could have an impact on their rowing performance had to be considered, for example training methods and recovery



strategies.

"Science in sport does not mean knowing all the answers and telling people what to do. Science means questioning, and generating ideas through observation, that could lead to solving problems.

"It is not all white lab-coat stuff. One needs to consider the stage of the sporting programme and provide support appropriate to that stage.

"In other words, it requires finding the holes in the system, that could be potential threats to the performance, and systematically filling them in order of priority."

What do you think can be done to ensure that the team will be able to defend their title successfully at the 2016 Games in Brazil?

"There can be no way of ensuring something like that. The outcome at the Games depends on many factors, which are not all controllable.

"Passion, very hard work and ongoing drive have to remain. Continuing our investment in great people will be vital. It is the people that cause the 'magic'.

"As far as the athletes are concerned, they will have to continue refining their craft and we will increasingly need to manage them as they mature.

"Individually they are quite different, but they are sharp men who know now what it takes to win gold at the Games.

"In short, we must be stronger and smarter by 2016."

As the national coach, Barrow is already planning for Brazil.

"I have learned the hard way that to be successful at the Games you cannot afford to leave anything to chance, no matter how insignificant it might seem."

Barrow is quietly confident that he will be able to keep the team together for the next four years.

"One of the main challenges will be to see if I can find a sponsor who will enable the rowers to do some part-time work in order to earn some extra income.

"It is important to realize that the rowers are not getting younger and that important changes can occur in their private lives. They now have

more responsibilities than they had four years ago.

"Unfortunately, to be competitive at the Games, no rower can afford to work full-time."

Barrow is actually quite optimistic about the future of SA rowing.

"This year, for the first time, we managed to win a medal at every major championship.

"Jenniene Curr won silver at the Junior World Championship and David Hunt and Vincent Breet also won silver at the u.23 World Championship.

"What makes this exciting is that all three of them will be contending for a place in the 2016 Olympic team. We might even be able to qualify for an extra boat.

"I firmly believe that good competition is the only way for any rower to improve. So nobody is at this stage guaranteed of a place in any team.

"In South African rowing you are, at any given time, only as good as your last race."