



In South Africa, Yachting Erases a Racial Barrier

By MICHAEL WINES, The New York Times

Published: February 1, 2005

CAPE TOWN - Long before Marcello Burricks was born, South Africa's apartheid police swept his mother and her family from their home in Simon's Town, a period-piece village on the Cape of Good Hope, and dispatched them to an impoverished ghetto called Slangkop, or Snakehead.

Their sin was being of mixed race in a place reserved for whites. Slangkop is where Marcello grew up, where his parents separated and where he hung with gangs and watched men die on the streets. When he was 8 a classmate stabbed him. When he was 14 he was arrested for beating a high-school teacher.

Today, 19-year-old Marcello Burricks helps trim the mainsail on a 25meter racing yacht in this city's stunning Table Bay. The only people he wants to beat are Larry Ellison, Ernesto Bertarelli and a host of other billionaires in the next America's Cup.

"I've got the opportunity now," he said. "And I am taking it in both my hands."

Sports is a mighty engine of inspirational tales. Here's another: an iconoclastic shipping tycoon mounts Africa's first challenge in the 153-year-old America's Cup series. Lacking deep-pocketed sponsors, he buys a secondhand yacht that finished out of the money two Cups ago.

He recruits a motley crew capped, improbably, by a group of black and mixed-race young men, some of them from South Africa's toughest townships, some of whom were hardly shaving when they climbed into their first boats. The pros write off the South Africans' outmoded tub and their diverse crew.

And then, more improbably still, they begin to finish races ahead of some of the best yachtsmen on earth.

Nobody expects that Team Shosholoza, as the South Africans call themselves, will pull off a miracle and win the next America's Cup, scheduled for 2007 in Valencia, Spain. But their accomplishments are pretty miraculous already.

They have shattered the image of yachting as the preserve of hyper-rich C.E.O.'s and lily-white sailing crews. They have raised the delicious prospect, however remote, that billionaires who lavish \$100 million and more on America's Cup challenges can be humbled by a rival with one-quarter the budget and a 19-year-old sailor with scars from old knife fights. They have attracted a corporate sponsor, a huge German company that pumped some \$17 million into Team Shosholoza this month just as money was running out.

www.teamshosholoza.com

T · · Systems ·



m
sc MEDITERRANEAN SHIPPING CO.



Then there is the biggest accomplishment of all: taking a handful of young men with cloudy futures and showing them that they, too, can take on the world's best.

"It's not an obligation, but everyone should do something for these kids, for these people," said Salvatore Sarno, the shipping company executive who is the driving force behind Shosholoza, which takes its name from an old African workers' song about striving together toward a common goal. "They've been robbed for a hundred years, even of the right to call themselves men. And now we must give."

Mr. Sarno, a Durbanite with a melodious Italian accent, is the first to say that Team Shosholoza is giving its nonwhite crewmen a chance, and nothing more. Like the whites on the crew, each sailor must prove himself worthy of contesting an America's Cup or be bumped aside by someone better.

"Sometimes people ask me, 'You're taking black crew on for political reasons?' " he said. "Ridiculous. Not true."

Ian Ainslie, a veteran sailor in three Olympics who is a crewman as well as the team strategist, said the black crewmen had earned their stripes. "I think a lot of people on the team were completely skeptical and said that we can try them for a while and they won't make the cut," he said. "And obviously that hasn't happened. They've risen to the occasion."

That is unsurprising; sailing skill is unrelated to skin color. But yachting, a sport that gobbles money and leisure time, has not been receptive to nonwhites, who often have little of either. In a century and a half, precious few America's Cup squads have been anything other than white; the last nonwhites on a winning crew sailed 13 years ago, on America3. Never has nearly a third of a crew been nonwhite.

That Team Shosholoza has seven on its 24-man sailing crew is due largely to a remarkable alliance between Mr. Sarno and Mr. Ainslie, his friend and fellow sailor for 15 years.

On returning from the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, Mr. Ainslie wanted a diversion, and found it in a job teaching geography, math and maritime studies at the local high school in Simon's Town. There he met Golden Mgedeza and Solomon Dipeere, two black 15-year-olds from Kwa Thema township in suburban Johannesburg whose grades had earned them scholarships to study at Simon's Town.

The two had been naval cadets at Eureka High School in Kwa Thema. Their maritime experience consisted of rowing a shell on Murray Park Lake southeast of the city. Under Mr. Ainslie's tutelage in Simon's Town, they began sailing in earnest and wheedling sailors at the local yacht club to let them work as crewmen during weekend races.

Mr. Ainslie, meanwhile, began leavening his training for the 2000 Sydney Olympics by giving free sailing classes to poor black youths from the townships around Simon's Town - "for fun," he said, "one day a week."

Word of mouth soon left him mobbed with youngsters eager for a day on a boat. Marcello Burricks lived across the peninsula from Simon's Town, but word reached him, too. "My father was a



fisherman and my grandfather used to be a whaler," he said, "so we were always close to the sea." At age 12 he had inveigled his way into a sailing class meant for 15-year-olds.

"Marcello came to our school and became the most enthusiastic guy," Mr. Ainslie said. "We had to try to encourage him to do some schoolwork as well or he'd have been sailing the whole time."

Enter Mr. Sarno, the shipping magnate, who shared Mr. Ainslie's interest in helping disadvantaged children. As a founder of Geneva-based Mediterranean Shipping Company, the world's second-largest container carrier, he sponsored annual regattas in Durban at which hundreds of young sailors, bused in and housed free, competed for honors.

Among them were Mr. Ainslie's protégés, young Golden, Solomon and Marcello, as well as two more teenagers, Ashton Sampson and Sieraj Jacobs, more experienced nonwhite sailors from the Cape Town area.

Mr. Sarno adopted the five, making them crew members on his own boat in the Durban regattas. Mr. Ainslie urged them on and sailed with them too. In 2002, Golden Mgedeza became the first black crewman to win South Africa's most coveted sailboat race, the Lipton Cup, and was chosen as yachtsman of the year by South Africa's Sailing Magazine. They raced off Mozambique; from Cape Town to Rio; in Newport, R.I., and elsewhere.

Mr. Sarno began talking of mounting an America's Cup bid. Mr. Ainslie said he judged him "quite mad."

"I said: 'No way. We don't have that kind of money in this country,'" Mr. Ainslie said. "We need to try a project that's more modest.' "

Mr. Sarno, undeterred, summoned his black crewmen for a meeting. "I promise you only one thing," he says he told them. "You will regret 100 times if you leave and come with me. You will not be rich, because we don't have money. But in 2007 we go to Valencia, we will fight, and one day President Mbeki will look in your eye, shake your hand and say, 'South Africa is proud of you.'"

"Everybody stood up, came to me, shook my hand, and then we hugged. It was fantastic. That was Shosholoza."

Marcello Burricks arises in his Snakehead flat at 4 a.m. each day, rides a minivan taxi, a train and another taxi to Cape Town harbor, and sails and exercises all day before making the same trip in reverse, getting home about 7 p.m. He has been moved from his old job as a grinder, which requires immense strength, because he is losing weight.

"Sometimes you're so tired after traveling that you don't have the appetite to eat," he said. But he does not give up. "We've all been told that there's no guarantee that we're going to be on the boat," he said. "That's why we have to push ourselves to the extreme."

Of eight contenders for the Cup, Team Shosholoza is currently seventh, ahead of an Italian team, after three regattas. But that is deceptive: others are racing state-of-the-art boats, while the



Shosholoza yacht is two generations old. In some individual races the South Africans have finished as high as fourth.

Thanks in part to the \$17 million infusion from T-Systems, a German information technology giant, two new and markedly faster Shosholozas will be launched before Valencia, the first of them in April.

And the crew is improving. "It's hard to quantify," said Paul Standbridge, the transplanted Briton and veteran Cup sailor who manages the squad. "But I'd put us at 60 percent of other teams. I think we'll get easily to 75 percent."

Too low, said Mr. Burricks, who uses his own yearning for a spot on Shosholoza as an example.

"One of the things they tried to teach us at sailing school is that if you work hard and do things, you can achieve," he said. "It's one of the few times I felt like I'd done something, and worked hard, and it really paid off."