

# America's Cup team gets top sailors

## Old Man of the Sea leads crew

**BRUCE VENTER**

A test of skill and strategy, the America's Cup match racing event is sailing's most coveted prize, pitting sailors and their craft against the fickle moods of the ocean and its winds.

Any challenger brave enough to throw down the gauntlet needs to prove, in a gruelling set of pre-match trials, that he or she is an adversary worthy of squaring up to the demands of a race in which there is no compromise.

Moored at a quiet Cape Town quay, South Africa's America's Cup ambitions rest with Team Shosholoza.

Team Shosholoza is built on a foundation of spirit, enthusiasm and the drive to compete in one of the premier events on the world's sporting calendar.

The first African challenge in the event's 153-year history, the South Africans caught the attention of their competitors with a spirited showing last year in Marseilles, France.

Initiated in 1851 by the New York Yacht Club, the America's Cup was dominated by its founders for 132 years.

Regarded as the longest winning streak in sporting history, the American domination floundered in 1983 at the hands of the Australians. Since then, the America's Cup, now held every four years, has seen a dominant New Zealand claiming the honours.

New Zealand's fortune ran aground in 2003, losing to the Swiss team aboard the "Oracle." Leading up to the 2007 America's Cup to be held in Valencia, Spain, Team Shosholoza will compete in the Louis Vuitton Cup, the winner of which gets to challenge the formidable Swiss for the America's Cup trophy.

Team Shosholoza's 18-man crew combines cultural diversity with a blend of youth and experience.

Veteran skipper Geoff Meek (51) takes the helm, bringing with him

his skills as a helmsman for the 1987 British team's pre-America's Cup Australian trials.

Meek, who boasts the State President's Sport Merits Award, says success depends on the team's preparation and dedication to their goal over the next three years.

"This is a team sport. Each crewman has a role and cannot function without the support of the others," says Meek.

Taking his crew and yacht through their paces in Table Bay, Meek says his team has the necessary qualities to successfully challenge the Swiss. "Drive, dedication and self-belief in our abilities define our spirit and passion for bringing the title home," said Meek.

The team bowman and sailing manager, Paul Standbridge (45), offers the team an impressive sailing pedigree. Five Whitbread Round the World races, 16 Atlantic crossings and two America's Cup races give Standbridge's curriculum vitae the decisive edge when competing against his peers.

"Team Shosholoza presents a unique opportunity to unite all South Africans towards a common goal. It is a proud experience to be associated with this team," says the man who is widely considered to be the most sought after bowman in professional yachting.

The remaining crew are drawn from across the entire South African cultural spectrum, from the ganglands of the Cape Flats, sprawling Highveld townships and leafy suburban streets.

"Our diversity makes us uniquely different to our competitors. Unity is a key ingredient for any crew," says Standbridge.

With a budget of R160-million in its arsenal, Team Shosholoza added another coup to its armoury when renowned British yacht designer, Jason Ker, stepped on board.

The team's current boat, a 25-metre craft of Italian design and built in 2000, is considered obsolete and is due for replacement.

Ker (33), who designed the recent



**FULL STEAM AHEAD:** South Africa is set to make sailing history by launching the first African challenge in the prestigious America's Cup match racing event in 2007.

**PICTURES: BRUCE VENTER**

Sydney-Hobart winner, the "Aera", boasts a fine track record for designing and building race-winning boats.

He will be responsible for constructing two America's Cup campaign yachts for Team Shosholoza's challenge, the first of which is set to be launched in April this year.

"To be given the opportunity to design an America's Cup yacht allows me to test my skills at the highest possible level," said Ker.

Ker, a first time designer for the America's Cup, is cautious about revealing too much detail about the

new boats, but says they will be innovative, boasting the latest technology and technique in yacht building.

"It's too early to comment on specifications, but the boats will be up there with the best," he said.

The man in Team Shosholoza's driving seat, managing director Salvatore Sarno, is quietly confident of his team's capacity to mount a successful challenge. "I have been told that it is a wonderful thing that we are here as an African team, trying to take the America's Cup to South Africa."

Sarno, whose leadership is uncompromising, but driven by example, says the challenge is an opportunity for South Africa to demonstrate its ability to participate in one of the world's most sophisticated sporting events.

"It is an opportunity to show that all South Africa's citizens can work together, do well and have success together," says Sarno.

Team Shosholoza have thrown down the gauntlet. They will, no doubt, find the Swiss as uncompromising as they are in their goal of winning the America's Cup.