

Team Shosholoza charts course for a win

Company's R100 million sponsorship buoys sailors



Ready to win... With a big international sponsor now on board, Team Shosholoza has become even more ambitious

PICTURE: PETER GOODMAN

BARBARA COLE

MASSIVE global sponsorship for Shosholoza – South Africa's America's Cup contender – has taken the highly-motivated team to a new level.

Now, Durban-based Capt Salvatore Sarno, the managing director of Team Shosholoza, which will be competing in the big race in 2007, is starting to "seriously think" that if the crew approaches the level of their rivals, they could well win the highest-profile competition in international sailing.

Sarno – the chairman of the giant Mediterranean Shipping Company in South Africa – said the team had humbly accepted that, even if there were some experienced members in the crew, they were still the "little boys" in the America's Cup.

Other international teams include Olympic medallists, while the fully-representative

South African team is a development crew, which has never competed in the big race before.

Team Shosholoza is, in fact, the first African team to compete in the 153-year-old race.

However, the team is infected with what Sarno calls the "Shosholoza virus" – and that, he explains, means they are driven by a huge vision, passion and commitment.

The campaign embodied the typical African spirit and passion to succeed and also aimed to showcase South Africa as a modern, dynamic, exciting country with skills and technological expertise equal to the best in the world, Sarno said.

Team Shosholoza is the only national team competing in the America's Cup. Rival teams are made up of sailors from several countries.

And this gave the team the edge that could make all the difference to the outcome, Sarno predicted.

"Shosholoza is our home and we've got the home-town advantage. And the crew is more mature and stronger than last year," said a proud Sarno.

He said the new R100 million sponsorship had given the team a "huge boost" and would not only make them feel more important, but also more relaxed, in the knowledge that they were in good hands.

One of the largest international investments in a South African sports team and one of the biggest sponsorships in local sailing, the welcome boost comes from T-Systems, one of Europe's leading providers of information and communications technology, which is associated with German Telecommunications.

T-Systems, now the chief sponsor, is also in South Africa, has almost 1 000 employees and boasts many blue-chip clients.

T-Systems' worldwide image campaign is centred on compet-

itive sailing, as it epitomises "a perfect interplay of strategy, tactics, perseverance, flexibility, speed and mastery of state-of-the-art technologies".

When the company decided to sponsor one of the 11 yachts competing in the 2007 America's Cup and several pre-race regattas, it commissioned two international marketing companies to advise them which was the favourite and had the potential to do well.

Both companies said that it was the Shosholoza – a firm favourite with the international media.

When Team Shosholoza competes against the best teams in the world, they will be watched by a live television audience of more than one billion people.

The new sponsorship will pay for a new Shosholoza yacht that is being built – it will be launched on April 27 – and also for the crew to go to Europe to compete in several regattas

ahead of the big challenge in two years. Sarno has also reserved the worldwide rights, for the name will go on to a third yacht, Shosholoza RSA 94.

He is still hoping to get another R55 million from other sponsors.

"I don't think some big corporations realise the magnitude of this project. I'm not looking for big numbers anymore, but would like to get the backing of some of the well-known businesses. This is a national effort and this is the chance for them to have a stake."

Portnet has just agreed to give Sarno a straddle carrier – similar in function to a crane – which will be modified, then shipped to Valencia in Spain for a regatta, where it will be used to lift the Shosholoza in and out of the water.

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