

Top sailors sink a silly racist myth

DALE GRANGER

9/2/1999
2ND E TIME

A COMMON misconception among the ignorant and prejudiced is that blacks don't swim, can't surf and would never want to sail.

It's a myth that ignores the historical reality that Polynesians charted the Pacific Ocean long before the arrival of Captain Cook.

Cook colonised Hawaii in the last-century and banned surfing in the islands as he judged the nakedness of the islanders to be offensive.

And up the East Coast of Africa, fisherman still build and sail their own wooden-hulled dhows, and sail hundreds of miles in pursuit both of fishing and trade.

Only in the 20th century arena of sport did sailing become the exclusive domain of white participants.

Black faces became as scarce to the America's Cup, Admiral's Cup and in the Whitbread round-the-world race as white tourists are to Harlem.

But in South Africa this is changing fast.

At the Mirror Worlds in Saldanha this week, four South African black development sailors qualified from the pre-worlds to advance through to the world championship event proper.

Ashton Sampson, 19, of Grassy Park met his crewman, Virgil Mpaly, 20, at Sea Scouts 10 years ago and introduced him to dinghy sailing last year.

And Solomon Dipeere, 18, and Tshego Mpye, 19, were among a group of East Rand schoolboys who secured a bursary to Simon's Town High, where they studied for a career in the maritime industry and began sailing with the Navy and False Bay Yacht Club.

This heralded a new voyage of adventure which soon had the teenagers crewing on South Africa's famous Voortrekker in round-the-buoys races in False Bay before graduating to South

Africa's top offshore regatta, the Lipton Cup, and this week's Mirror Worlds.

South Africa's top sailor at Saldanha this week is Grassy Park's Siraj Jacobs, an accomplished yachtsman who has already sailed the Cape-to-Rio race, finished fourth on an Olympic class Laser in the Youth World Sailing Championships and recently skippered South Africa's team at the Coca-Cola Youth Match Racing series in New Zealand.

Jacobs is on the National Olympic Committee of South Africa's Operation Excellence programme and has set his sights on sailing for his country at the Olympic Games.

The transformation of South African sailing was first inspired by False Bay Yacht Club and the navy, who were instrumental in establishing the country's first ever development program five years ago.

Almost every weekend, FBYC vice-commodore Sarah Kennedy invites aspiring sailors from all communities to the club where she runs a basic course.

She takes pupils through seamanship classes to dinghies and eventually to keelboats on races held at the club on Wednesday evenings and weekends.

So far the club has produced 70 graduates from Kennedy's course, while at Zeekoevlei Yacht Club Siraj's father, Fuad, is also active in teaching kids from surrounding schools the art and intricacies of tacking, gybing, helming and trimming.

It's not that black South Africans never had an interest in sailing or the sea, just that the sport was considered too elitist, expensive and even futile if you did not know anyone who owned a boat.

It's an old excuse, however. Siraj says: "These days there's nothing to stop anyone who wants to sail going down to a yacht club, signing up for a course to sail, getting to know people who sail and joining them out at sea."

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