

Honour in defeat for Shosholoza

15/5/2006 AFRICA

Special Correspondent

IN TERMS of their short America's Cup history, this past weekend was one where it can be safely said Team Shosholoza went from buoys to men.

Victory off Valencia in two races on Saturday was followed by honour in defeat yesterday as they put South African sailing on the global map in the latest series of Louis Vuitton qualifying races.

Last night the crew were ecstatic despite losing a hard-fought race by 42 seconds to the Italians' Luna Rossa Challenge – one of the leading four teams entered for the 2007 America's Cup, sport's oldest trophy.

On Saturday, South African flags flew proudly after two maiden victories. First they fended off the French Areva Challenge, then went on to score a double by convincingly beating the Spanish home team, Desafio Espanol.

By today, Team Shosholoza had climbed to seventh position.

"Every day we are getting better. Last year we were losing by over a minute and this year we have improved our boat speed by 30 seconds.

"It is the closest race we have ever had against Luna Rossa. We are all feeling very optimistic about this," said Mark Sadler who, at 31, is the youngest skipper of the 12 teams competing in a series of sail-offs to find a challenger for holders Alinghi, of Switzerland, next year.

The managing director of Team Shosholoza, Captain Salvatore Sarno, said: "Luna Rossa was racing a brand new boat but we still need to put on our new rudder, boom and racing mast. We know what our little problems are and how we can gain those 30 or 40 seconds.

"The other teams must be worried."

The last statement might seem a bit ambitious, but it shows Shosholoza's progress in recent months.

Of yesterday's defeat to the much-touted Italians, Dee Smith, their American coach and tactician, said: "We sailed an excellent race. We were beaten but we are starting to build on what we've learnt and getting our systems together. Now we just need to pimp our ride."

Over 40 000 spectators visited the America's Cup port yesterday and the race course was packed with hundreds of spectator boats swarming both race areas.

The winds were light and fickle and racing was postponed for two hours on the north course until the winds had settled. Because of the late start, Shosholoza's second race of the day, against Alinghi, was postponed.

"Nothing short of a meteoric rise in fortunes for the South Africans – what a



Double whammy: South Africa's America's Cup hopeful Shosholoza rounds a buoy in a training run ahead of Saturday's remarkable match victories.

tremendous victory," said race commentator Andy Green, adding that it has been a particularly sweet win after a disastrous day on Friday when Shosholoza lost to United Internet Germany and the Swedish Victory Challenge.

"I have never felt so proudly South African. The crew were fantastic and it was amazing hearing the crowds cheering us as we came

'I have never felt so proudly South African'

down the canal," said skipper Sadler as he was sprayed with champagne by his team mates on the dockside.

The match against the French Areva Challenge was a tight tactical duel from start to finish. The French hit the start line just two seconds ahead of the South Africans, who had held their ground in the pre-start. It was a neck-and-neck race up the first beat, with the two boats overlapped at the top mark, the French just a second ahead as they rounded.

The French gained on the spinnaker run to lead by 13 seconds. The turnaround in the South Africans' fortunes came in the second beat when Shosholoza took advantage of a big wind shift to the right and crossed ahead of the French to take the lead. There was no looking back for the South Africans who won by 14 seconds.

The highly experienced Spanish team were lying fourth on the leaderboard behind the Alinghi, BMW Oracle and Emirates Team New Zealand until the South African upset in dying, flukey winds.

The Spanish won the start, but the South Africans benefited from going to the right side of the course. From there it was a nail-biting, battle around the course, with the Spanish threatening to take the lead a number of times, but the South Africans finished a triumphant 33 seconds ahead.

Yesterday, Team Shosholoza were slightly slower than the Italians off the start but soon picked up speed. Luna Rossa built an 18-second lead, without ever managing to shake off the South Africans, who were only 42 seconds behind at the line.



Two down: Shosholoza team member Ashley Sampson of Grassy Park rides past the team base in Port America's Cup, Valencia, Spain. Sampson is the crew's mid-bowman.