

Messenger who delivers the goods on the high seas

From the archives of Richard
Crockett & Sailing Publications.
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By KURT SWART

TWENTY years after taking part in the Cape-to-Rio yacht race, a messenger is gearing up to repeat the experience — even though he hasn't seen a yacht or the sea since 1973.

Mr Douglas Makhafola, 55, who works at a Randburg dental equipment factory, will be a crew member on Realty 1 Estate Agents, an 18m aluminium ketch captained by Knysna businessman Alan Dando, when the race starts in January.

It was with Mr Dando at the helm, and on the same yacht — then called Shelley-Anne — that Mr Makhafola set sail on his first trans-Atlantic crossing.

He was employed by Mr Dando's father as a gardener at the time.

Dangerous

"Alan started to build a boat and he asked me to help him. When the work was done he asked me to come join him in the race as a crew member. I said yes, let's do it," said Mr Makhafola, who lives in Atteridgeville, near Pretoria.

But on the yacht's maiden voyage from Durban to Cape Town, the gardener had second thoughts.

"The sea was rough and the boat was going up and down. I didn't get sea-sick, like some of the other crew, but I thought this sailing was a dangerous business."

Mr Makhafola's misgivings were reinforced when, shortly after the start of the 1973 Cape-to-Rio race, the ketch collided with another yacht off Robben Island.

"The boat was holed and I was scared as the water came pouring in, but we had quick-dry cement and we managed to plug the leak. Thirty days later we saw the lights of Rio at night. We managed to finish halfway up the field."

Mr Makhafola thoroughly enjoyed Rio.

"I went up Sugarloaf Mountain, I had my picture taken on Copacabana beach and after that it was carnival time — three days of dancing and drinking. I had

a great time. Maybe that's why my wife is not too keen 'on me going again," he laughed.

"I have not sailed since. Alan moved to a fruit farm in Tzaneen and eventually to Knysna. I visited him once on the farm, but we only saw each other occasionally over the last 19 years."

Then, two months ago, Mr Dando phoned Mr Makhafola and said: "Hi, do you want to go to Rio again?"

Mr Makhafola was delighted at the prospect, but it took a lot of persuading to win over his wife, Yvonne. "I had to beg her, but she eventually agreed."

Mr Makhafola's employer gave his blessing for the messenger to compete in the event. "Fortunately I have two and a half months leave due, and I will have my job when I get back.

"I have started exercising again, as you have to be fit for a long-distance yacht race. I have started walking up stairs instead of taking the lift and I'm looking forward to the trip — and the carnival," he said.

Reliable

However, the 1993 Rothman's Cape-to-Rio will be Mr Makhafola's last voyage.

"I don't believe I will ever sail again after that," he said.

Speaking from Knysna, Mr Dando said: "Douglas proved to be a very good sailor. He's reliable, pleasant and fits in with the rest of the crew. I have travelled the distance with him before, and I would have taken the whole of the original seven-man crew if I could.

"Unfortunately, the others have business commitments and it's only Douglas and I from the 1973 team."

Mr Dando does not believe he has much chance of line honours, but on handicap in the cruising class he hopes to finish in the top three.



RIO BOUND: Douglas Makhafola, of Randburg, trains for the Cape-to-Rio race

Picture: ROB HADLEY