

Shosholoza ready for sixth America's Cup qualifier

After a disastrous regatta in Spain on a new but untested yacht, South Africa's premier sailing team is itching to chalk up a few victories

BY JUDY VAN DER WALT

The wind howled down the east quay of the V&A Waterfront and rain pelted the windows of the refurbished fishing shed that has become headquarters of South Africa's America's Cup 2007 challenge.

The only person not freezing was Salvatore Sarno, Team Shosholoza's captain, who glowed with passion as he briefed the media on the America's Cup qualifying regattas in Valencia two months ago, and the Malmö-Skane Louis Vuitton Act 6 in Sweden this week.

The America's Cup, in which international yacht squads challenge the incumbent cup holders, is held every four years after a series of 13 qualifying regattas in Spain, Sweden and Italy that will determine team rankings.

In the semi-final in Valencia in 2007, all the teams will compete in a match race event called the Louis Vuitton Cup. The winner qualifies for the final and will challenge the defending champion Team Alinghi in a match race for the ultimate prize, the America's Cup.

Proudly South African but heavily accented, the Italian-born captain said he had lost 8kg in Valencia.

"Valencia, eet was a dee-saster, totally crazy!" he said. He described a litany of calamities and tribulations that would have sunk many lesser teams. But not Shosholoza. "We were smiling, we looked happy, but we were losing all the way."

South Africa's new yacht was lowered into Spanish waters just 10 hours before the first race, without the hydraulic system that changes the shape of the sails when the boat tacks. And after waiting for their new mast in vain, they had to buy a second-hand one that was not compatible with their sails.

"It was like driving a Ferrari in the Formula One with only one gear. Crazy!" says Sarno. "Now we need a win in Sweden; we really need a win."

In Valencia harbour Shosholoza lay huddled between the super-rich BMW Oracle and Alinghi teams, the mega-luxury yachts of their billionaire sponsors swaying on the horizon.

With the billionaire teams spending upwards of €100 million (R790 million), they are understandably secretive and palpably tense.

Their crews are the Michael Schumachers of the sailing world and are chauffeur-driven from their five-star hotel to the harbour every day. The South Africans have bicycles parked behind their sheds. No wonder the sailing crowd and Spanish public have embraced the Zulu warriors.

They even seem to have received some help from above. One night during a regatta in Marseilles, a mini tornado hit the harbour and the only mast pointing skywards the next morning was that of our own contender, its 7m-high South African flag gallantly rippling in the gale.

This so impressed a local man of the cloth that the padre came down to the harbour to bless Shosholoza against all future mishaps.

"Our crew are enjoying themselves, always smiling and laughing and the people love their African warmth," says Sarno. At the America's Cup pavilion in Valencia, fans can sail miniature yachts, Shosholoza with its cheerful African graphics is the most popular choice.

Being popular is all very well, but Sarno, the South African chairman of Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), says it is the first time he has been last in his life and he doesn't like it. He has a plan. Three world-class yachtsmen have been recruited to give the team the America's Cup experience they're lacking.

"In match-racing, the starting routine is very strategic and the first boat to start has the best chance of winning," said Sarno.

Two match-racing champions will be helping the team in Sweden next week: Chris Law, a four-times British Olympic sailor, and Stehn Mohr of Denmark, as well as John Sweeney, a former member of the BMW Oracle team.

Shosholoza has got €7.5 million over the next three years from T-Systems, a German IT multinational. Sarno's company, MSC, has come to the party with John Mohnne a four-of Denmark, as



Father Miguel Navarro of the Colegio del Patriarca blesses Shosholoza RSA 83 at a ceremony attended by Team Shosholoza in Valencia, Spain

PHOTOGRAPHS: PETER GOLDMAN



Captain Salvatore Sarno: 'All we want is to sail for South Africa'



Team Shosholoza in the thick of it during the Valencia Louis Vuitton Act 5 racing in Spain in June this year

But the captain is miffed. He has battled to get South African companies

"The America's Cup is like the Tour de France, the Formula One - billions of people watch it on television. We are

proud, all we want is to sail for South Africa," says Sarno. Just the other day he was at the

airport in Naples when suddenly he heard the Zulu work song. Sarno whipped out his cellphone, but it wasn't

the captain's Shosholoza ringtone; it was a documentary about the team appearing on the big screen in the departure lounge.

"But now we need South Africa behind us. The song says it all: *Wena u ya baleka: we always work as one.*"