

Zulu storm bears down on the America's Cup

An Italian captain is the driving force behind South Africa's first challenge in the big-time yachting league, writes **Judy van der Walt**

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Shosholoza! Make way, here come the Zulus. It is a bright blue and gold winter's morning in Cape Town as the sounds of the Zulu work song echoes against the centuries-old stone of the Victoria & Alfred basin. The high-tech training yacht Shosholoza is setting out for a day's work on the waves. *Stimela, sphuma*, South Africa! Here comes the steam train.

South Africa, already dubbed "the Zulus", has for the first time entered the America's Cup, which is to be held next in Valencia, Spain, in 2007. You could call it the equivalent of South Africa building its own Formula One Ferrari to enter a Grand Prix. And to spice up the excitement even further, this Ferrari will be driven mostly by South Africans.

The V&A drawbridge swings up like a salute and the Shosholoza heads out to sea. The yacht, part of the winning Louis Vuitton fleet in 2000, sailed to glory in the previous America's Cup, but sailing technology develops so fast that it has been relegated to duty as a training yacht and renamed Shosholoza.

South Africa will enter two state-of-the-art yachts in the America's Cup. Top yacht designer Jason Ker has been commissioned to figure out how to wrap the maximum 24 tons of yacht around a lead hull and ultra-light carbon-fibre shell – and fly like the wind.

The America's Cup, predating the Olympic Games by 45 years, is a league of big thinkers and dreamers. Team Shosholoza's big thinker is Italian-born Captain Salvatore Sarno, who arrived in Durban 14 years ago aboard a granite freighter and stayed.

Sarno, now the chairperson of the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) in South Africa, is leading our challenge.

This is a big-bucks campaign that will cost more than R200 million in total. With the help of principal sponsor MSC, Sarno has facilitated the payment of the entry fee of €50 000 (about R400 000), a performance bond (ensuring participation and debt cover) of €1 million and \$25 000 (about R300 000) in a trademark agreement to use the America's Cup logo.

Sarno's dream boats will showcase this country's technology. He nurtures sailing talent like delicate seedlings, and today three of the star pupils of Izivunguvungu, a sailing school sponsored by MSC, are crew on the Shosholoza.

The wind is lazy on this bright winter's morning but as the breeze finally picks up, Golden Mgedeza, Solomon Dipeere and Marcello Burricks have all hands on deck as



America's Cup hopeful Solomon Dipeere lends a hand as the crew members prepare for the day's training

the sails are unfurled. Mgedeza, although from KwaThema in Gauteng, is in his element as he scales the 32m mast to hook up the main sail.

Shosholoza is recruiting crew and hundreds of hopefuls from underprivileged communities have applied, many of whom have never even seen the sea. Olympic yachtsman Ian Ainslie is in charge of sorting for the diamonds at Izivunguvungu in Simon's Town, where his charges are brought up to a minimum level of fitness, swimming and sailing ability.

Then they'll have a trial run on the Shosholoza and meet Paul Standbridge, the sailing manager. Seldom has the phrase "running a tight ship" suited a man better. It was a stroke of good fortune for our America's Cup effort that Standbridge, a Brit, had married a South African and spent a lot of time in Cape Town. Which is how the veteran of five round-the-world races, two America's Cups, 16 Atlantic crossings and the former sailing manager of Britain's America's Cup team has come to manage Shosholoza.

This is the man who will forge our team into a unit that "will represent South Africa with pride", he says, one hand on the yacht's big aluminium steering wheel.

"An America's Cup yacht is a highly sophisticated racing machine and potentially very dangerous.

"There is a 15-ton load on the running back stays, seven on the main sheet and three on the jib, so one mistake can lead to a bad accident. In fact, basic sailing skills aren't enough. To crew on these boats you have to be among the best in the world."

While we are being towed out to the wind (Shosholoza has no engine),



Under full sail in a light breeze, Shosholoza is put through its paces in a tacking exercise

Standbridge lets me take the wheel and the 24-ton yacht responds like a sports car to the slightest turn.

Between issuing orders in a firm, calm voice, he says: "Our plan is for as many South Africans as possible to be on the boat and my intention is that when we have finished coaching them they will all be better than me."

He will also toughen them up for the most rigorous international competition, and has time on his side with an intensive three-year training programme ahead.

At last, out in the middle of Table Bay, we have found the wind and it is time for Shosholoza skipper Geoff Meek to take over. The action revs up and every man on board has a job.

Arms are a blur as two men per



Shosholoza crew members Golden Mgedeza, left, and Ashton Sampson flank skipper Geoff Meek, centre, at the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town

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grinder hoist up the silver sails that give the boat a killer look. Like all men of the sea, Meek has those friendly salt- and surf-eroded lines around his eyes. A quiet skipper, his leadership starts simply with his presence.

Meek is a legend in yachting and has landed his dream job at 51. The multiple world champion and yacht racing veteran was the alternate skipper for the British team in its pre-America's Cup trials in 1987 and

has no illusions about the high level of competition.

But the team has a secret if dangerous ally – the Cape of Storms.

"The seas here are bigger than any of the America's Cup venues. It can be quite radical in Table Bay and we've sailed in up to 30-knot winds in choppy seas – not what these racing yachts were designed for."

"In these conditions we are forced to be very focused. Sometimes the deck can be half a metre under

water. It's been a big learning curve for the team."

Today Meek has the men repeatedly sailing a windward/leeward course, perfecting sail trim, split-second timing and grinder co-ordination. Snatches of the *Shosholoza* song come to me above the wind, roughly translated as "move faster, go forwards!"

It's hard work, but Meek and his men are smiling into the wind and sun. *Stimela, sphuma*, South Africa!