



Thabelo has ducks in a row

Young rower likes to be in his boat more than anything else

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● WHEN Thabelo Masutha didn't return with the rest of the training squad after a 20km session along the snaking Katse Dam in Lesotho, national coach Roger Barrow started worrying he'd crashed his boat.

Masutha eventually arrived back at the concrete ramp, his boat intact.

"I asked him why he had taken so long," said Barrow, "and he said 'I was really enjoying myself' so he did an extra 5km."

That's what impresses Barrow, a hard taskmaster. "He has a passion for rowing and sitting in the boat... He seems to enjoy being out on the water.

"That's where he's happiest."

Masutha, who leaves on Thursday to

compete in the world junior championships in Lithuania from August 2-6, has always had an appetite for hard training.

"School holidays was usually my favourite time to train because you know you have an edge on your competition because everyone's like 'oh, it's holidays, let's go and get slow'," he said.

Masutha, in his first year of information science at the University of Pretoria, even felt the in-season training schedule at King Edward VII School wasn't hard enough, although it tired him out.

"I was usually asleep in class," he admitted with a smile.

"The easiest [class] to fall asleep in was definitely Afrikaans.

"We had a pretty fun English class so as much as you can sleep, it was funnier being awake because I felt like something always happened."

What to expect?

Masutha took up rowing when he got to high school.

"They had a rowing camp for all the grade eights and my mom just thought it was an opportunity to get to know kids and do something before you go to the school.

"It was very social," said Masutha, the only one of his original squad to still be rowing.

He doesn't know what to expect in his single sculls race in Europe next week, but he's learned the hard – and embarrassing – way that rowing doesn't always go according to plan, like when he and his partner were beating allcomers at under-14 level.

"We had quite a good season, we're undefeated in the double sculls. It was SA champs, end of the season, time to seal the deal.

"We were racing, going, going, leading the pack and it's 250m to go – it was something we'd worked for the whole season – and I caught a crab close to the line, then my blade got stuck under the boat and then my blade snapped and then we capsized."

He told the story with a laugh, but added: "It was a lot more heartbreaking on the day."

National junior coach Marco Galeone said there were no medal expectations on Masutha, seventh in the double sculls at last year's world junior championships.

"He's 18 and he's got a long, long future ahead of him. Whatever happens in August is not the end of Thabelo's career, it's the start of Thabelo's career."



Did you know

1. The choice

Masutha was in the KES first rugby squad last year, but chose rowing.

2. The beautiful game

Loved soccer as a kid at junior school, but was 'never really good' at it.

3. Junior success

Masutha and Luc Daffarn ended 7th at the 2016 world junior champs.

4. Schoolmates

They and Kyle Schoonbee went to same preparatory school, Pridwin.

5. The only boy child

Masutha is one of seven siblings, all the others being sisters.

