

ROWING

COMING ON BOARD

SOUTH AFRICA'S NEXT GENERATION ARE RISING THROUGH THE RANKS. BY **WILHELM DE SWARDT**

South Africa's rowers proved they could hold their own against the world's best by winning two medals each at the World U23 Championships in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, and the World Junior Championships in Trakai, Lithuania.

At the U23 worlds, Kyle Schoonbee won silver in the men's single sculls and Nicole van Wyk (*below*) bronze in the lightweight women's single sculls. Megan Hancock was the star

at the junior champs, winning silver in the single sculls, while Thabelo Masuthu won bronze in the men's single sculls.

Schoonbee (Tuks/HPC) put his silver medal performance down to getting his body to go where the mind wanted it to. He was 'Mr Consistency' throughout the worlds, winning two of the four races he competed in and finishing second in the other two. He won his quarter- and semi-final heats, and his best time of 6min 50.14sec in the quarter-finals was the second fastest of all the men's single sculls races.

'It's the first time I got to stand on the winner's podium at a World Championships,' he says. 'I've always worked towards that, but came up short in the past. Moments after finishing, it all felt quite surreal because normally I would have been leaving the jetty to go back to the "grinder", but suddenly I was led to a medal presentation.'

Schoonbee (*opposite page, right*), who studies chemical engineering, admits winning a medal has helped him believe in his abilities, something which would have stood him in good stead at the senior World Championships at the end of September in the US, where he was scheduled to compete in the single sculls.

11th SA's placing on the medals table at the World U23 Championships



In his free time, he's an avid student of entrepreneurship. 'When I'm not training I'm trying to develop my software skills and I've started a couple of entrepreneurial projects. Some have worked and some not.'

Van Wyk (Tuks/HPC) seems to make a habit of winning medals at the World U23 Championships. Her bronze medal follows silver at the previous championships.

But she described her performance as disappointing. 'Looking back at the training I did in the buildup to the World Championships, I didn't feel like I put in my best performance and if I had done, the result could have been a lot different.'





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Van Wyk says national rowing coach Roger Barrow best summarised her performances. 'He explained to me that it's a lot different when you first compete internationally, when there's no real expectation of you. But then you go to a World Championships where everybody expects you to be fast.

'The positive I can take from worlds is that I realise I've got to work on

handling the extra pressure better. So, in a way, not getting the result I wanted was a good thing as I'm more motivated for next year, when I'll compete at the senior world champs for the first time.

'Right now I'm doing extra gym and strength training. It's a long process for me as I'm still trying to analyse where I went wrong. I think it was an

accumulation of many small things and a lot of it has to do with inexperience.'

Van Wyk, who is studying for a Bcom in human resources management, says she doesn't have time to do a lot of fun stuff at the moment but in her free time she likes to cook up a storm, her speciality being lamb shank. 'Patience ... lots of patience,' she insists. 'It has to cook for hours.'

Hancock's performance should come as no surprise when one hears her talking about rowing. 'I love the sport and being active. I guess it's to do with me being competitive by nature,' says the Grade 12 pupil at St Mary's School in Johannesburg. 'I love to test my skills against rivals. Rowing is the

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ideal sport to do as it really gets my adrenaline pumping.

'Rowing has helped me understand that nearly anything is possible if you're prepared to put your mind to it. The discipline and dedication I've acquired through rowing have stood me in good stead in all other aspects of life.'

Hancock (right) readily admits she didn't expect to medal; her only goal was to qualify for the A final. 'After that there was no more pressure. I'd achieved what I set out to do. That meant I was quite calm when I lined up for the final.'

'My coach advised me not to over-exert myself too much over the first 500m. I took that to heart and as the race progressed, I got more confident in my abilities. Over the past few hundred metres, I made a huge effort to pass Spain's Esther Briz, but she pipped me to the line by a second.'

'As I crossed the line I was a bit disappointed. I thought I would remain seated in the boat and

I felt sorry for myself, but then it sunk in that I'd achieved so much more than I'd expected to.'

Hancock hopes to make her U23 debut at next year's World Championships and doesn't mind which boat she gets to compete in.

Helping animals is Hancock's other passion. 'Whenever I get free time, I work at shelters, doing various



DID YOU KNOW?

The Junior World Championships doubled as the main qualification regatta for the 2018 Youth Olympic Games in Argentina.

tasks, trying to make a difference in the lives of animals. There's nothing more gratifying. After finishing matric, I might study veterinary science.'

Masuthu's (left) bronze medal made South African sports history as the Tuks product became the first black rower to medal at a World Junior Championships.

He admits being disappointed with finishing third, as he races to win. 'It felt like I'd lost the race. It didn't sink in that I'd won a medal. It was only two days later when I was looking at race photos that I realised what I had achieved.'

'Rowing, to me, is one of the ultimate sports. Every day has its challenges. Often, after completing a training session at Tuks/HPC I'm emotionally and physically drained, but all is forgotten the moment you put together that one perfect race in rowing. There are no words to describe that feeling.'

From next year Masuthu will be competing in the U23 category and realises he'll have to up his game if he wants to remain a competitive rower. His long-term goal is to represent South Africa at the Olympics.

There are more strings to Masuthu's bow: he's also a talented musician and likes to DJ in his free time. He's an avid composer who writes the lyrics to his own songs and can play quite a few instruments. Having said that, one of the few times he called it quits as a musician was when he tried to master playing the bagpipes.

And rowing and music aren't his only talents.

He may have been able to make a career in professional rugby. The Lions rugby side offered him a contract when he was playing U16 rugby at KES.

He's well aware that he could have earned a substantial salary had he chosen to play rugby but for now money's not the be-all and end-all for Masuthu. 'I'd rather win a rowing race than a rugby game.'

De Swardt is communications officer at the High Performance Centre in Pretoria.

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