



# Rowers begin Olympic qualifying

OCKERT DE VILLIERS

ockert.devilliers@nl.co.za

South Africa will be looking to qualify five boats for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games at the World Rowing Championships in Ottensheim, Austria starting on Sunday.

The Tuks-based team includes Olympic medallists John Smith and Lawrence Brittain partnering in the men's pair.

Four heavyweight boats — the men's pair, double sculls, four and the women's pair — will aim to qualify for next year's quadrennial showpiece.

The lightweight women's doubles sculls combination of Kirsten McCann and Ursula Grobler will revive their partnership from the Rio Games. Nicole van Wyk will be in the sixth boat at the regatta in the lightweight single sculls which is not an Olympic-class event.

National rowing coach Roger Barrow was cautious about making predictions about his crews' chances.

The men's pair sees Olympic gold medallist Smith and Brittain, who won silver at the 2016 Rio Games, renew the partnership that earned them the men's pair gold at the 2010 World Under-23 Championships. Smith has been battling with the transition from lightweight rowing to the heavyweight class.

The duo will look to finish among the top 11 at the regatta to book their place for Tokyo.

The championships mark the comeback of Grobler, who hung up her oars after the Rio Games where she and McCann finished fourth in the lightweight women's double sculls final. The 39-year-old last year moved back to Pretoria from Cape Town to pursue



Kirsten McCann

her dream of another Olympics.

"Ursula has done very well to get back into the boat with Kristen and move Nicole into the lightweight single now," Barrow said. "She returned almost wiser than what she was and is doing it for the right reasons now, not that she wasn't before. She's taken some time to get her strength back to where it was, and I still think she has some way to go. If they do qualify hopefully they can concentrate on building for the next season."

The team will be looking to qualify a heavyweight men's double for the first time with Mzwandile Sotsaka and Bradley Betts teaming up.

World Under-23 women's pair silver medallists Jessica Schoonbee and Tayla-May Bentley will look to make the step up at the championships for a shot at Olympic qualification.

#### **SOUTH AFRICAN CREWS:**

Lawrence Brittain and John Smith (men's pairs), David Hunt, Sandro Torrente, Kyle Schoonbee and Jake Green (men's fours), Mzwandile Sotsaka and Bradley Betts (men's double sculls), Nicole van Wyk (women's lightweight sculls), Tayla-May Bentley and Jessica Schoonbee (women's pairs), Ursula Grobler and Kirsten McCann (lightweight women's sculls).