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SA rowers aim to qualify for Olympics



BOASTING three medals from the last four Olympics, rowing remains one of the key sports for South Africa ahead of next year's Tokyo Games.

The country has sent six boats to the World Championships starting in Ottensheim, Austria, today when five crews will be looking to qualify for the quadrennial showpiece in Tokyo.

The Tuks-based team will have a strong heavyweight presence featuring four boats including 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 – and the lightweight women's double skills will be aiming for qualification.

Former world lightweight single sculls champion Kirsten McCann will rekindle her partnership with Ursula Grobler, who was with her in the doubles boats at the Rio 2016 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.

It is a remarkable comeback for Grobler, who hung up her oars after the Rio Games. She and McCann finished fifth in the lightweight double sculls in Rio and were the country's first female World Championships medallists when they won bronze in 2015.

The 39-year-old Grobler last year moved back to the capital city from Cape Town to pursue her dream of another Olympics and a possible medal.

"Ursula has done very well to get back into the boat with Kristen and move Nicole into the lightweight

single now," said national rowing coach Roger Barrow. "She returns 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, 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 men's pair boat will have a reunion of sorts for Olympic gold medallist Smith and Brittain, who won silver in Rio. The duo won the pair gold at the 2010 World Under-23 Championships and will be looking to finish top 11 at the regatta to qualify for Tokyo.

"It is still a big challenge for John Smith to move up a category, to date he still hasn't got a great performance as a heavyweight rower, and I hope he'll be able to do that at these world champs," Barrow said.

"It is exciting with him teaming up with Lawrence Brittain as they

teamed up and won a gold medal at Under-23 level back in 2010."

The men's four boat includes Rio Olympians Jake Green and David Hunt with Sandro Torrente and Kyle Schoonbee. "We have a really strong combination this year, have prepared well and are positive about our chances," Hunt said.

"We are faster than the combination that raced in the last qualifying regatta in 2015. The competition will be tougher because the number of boats that qualify has been reduced from 11 to eight, but I think we are more than capable of getting one of those spots."

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

