

Together once again: Rowing's odd couple

Lawrence Brittain and John Smith were tossed together – and keep meeting up

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● Destiny seems intent on making John Smith and Lawrence Brittain a partnership.

The Olympic medallists are crewing the men's heavyweight pair at the SA squad's preparation camp at Ebenezer Dam in Magoebaskloof ahead of the World Cup regatta in Poland later this month.

Ordinarily the odds against this partnership would have been too great, but these two veterans have proven to be extraordinary – right from the first time they came together as youngsters in 2010.

In their second years at Tuks at the time, Smith and Brittain were tossed together like leftovers; there were no under-23 heavyweights for Brittain to row with, and Smith had been booted out of the lightweight squad.

"Paul Jackson [coach of the lightweight men's four] said [to me] 'you're not strong enough yet, row with the heavyweights, get stronger and you can come try for the team after the season'," Smith recalled.

Thus the odd couple of rowing was born. "He [Brittain] was quite strong and I was physically behind, so I had to train so hard just to keep the boat straight," said Smith.

But they went to the world under-23 championships and bagged SA's first-ever gold medal of the age-group showpiece.

They went their separate ways after that. "I went back to the lightweights and after being [bottom] of the pile, I was right on top," said Smith, a member of the lightweight four that won gold at London 2012.

After 2011 Brittain moved to bowside permanently.

In 2014 Smith and James Thompson, another member of the golden four, combined in the lightweight men's double sculls to win the world championships in a world best time that remains to this day.

But Brittain's form was tanking and later in 2014 he discovered he had lymph node cancer.

He beat the disease and won his place in the Olympic squad, teaming up with Shaun Keeling to claim silver at Rio 2016.

Smith moved up to heavyweight after the Brazil showpiece and battled it out with seven other hopefuls fighting for six seats in two boats, the premier pair and the four.

To get ranked among the top two heavyweights has taken a monumental effort that has proved too much for many other lightweights around the world.

"A lot of lightweights shifted to the heavyweight teams [after the lightweight men's four was scrapped from the Olympic programme after 2016]," said Brittain.

"It was a big thing in 2017, but since then a lot of those guys have not managed to hang around. John must be one of the last ones."

Smith's transition was aided by his lanky 1.92m frame, giving him a leverage to compensate for his lack in weight.

He's improved his performance on the ergo, the indoor rowing machine, by four seconds.

"It doesn't sound like much, but when you're at the top of your game four seconds is a lot," said Brittain. "I would hope to be one second quicker from Rio to Tokyo [2020]."

Still, Smith feels his conversion is not yet complete.

"Everyone thinks it's an easy transition and it happens overnight and I feel I'm still not there. I thought it was going to be six months, but it's taken two years to get used to the extra weight."

From 70kg as a lightweight, he has struggled to gain more than 10kg, with the heavy workload of training reducing his efforts to bulk. "I [eventually] got told training takes preference over weight."

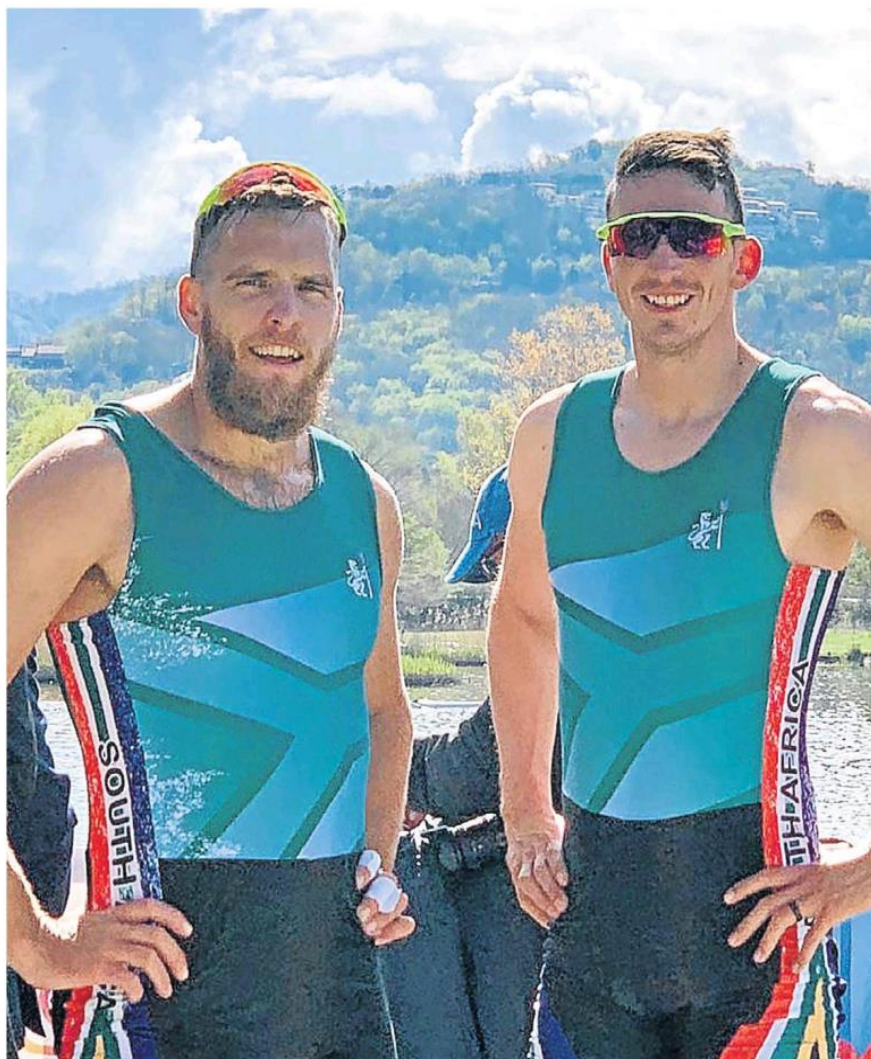
It was Smith who came up with the idea of reigniting the partnership with Brittain



He was quite strong ... I had to train so hard just to keep the boat straight

John Smith

Olympic rowing medallist, and partner of Lawrence Brittain



Olympic medallists Lawrence Brittain, left, and John Smith, seen here in Italy recently, have teamed up in a pairs boat together for the first time in nearly a decade. They won SA's first under-23 world championship gold medal in 2010. Picture: Danielle Lincoln

during a team camp in Lesotho in March.

"We were trying all combinations to see which ones could be fast," said Smith.

"Johnny was going really well in his combinations and I was going quite well in the combinations I was in," added Brittain.

But putting the two together wasn't an obvious choice because both were bowstiders, rowing with the oar on the left side of the boat.

That meant Brittain had to return to the stroke seat, with the oar on the right side.

"It's like trying to learn to write with your other hand," said Brittain. "Everything is opposite. The balancing is opposite."

Even though he had stroked before, "it still took a while."

Persuading coach Roger Barrow to give it a try was the easy part, though he had to be convinced that it wouldn't play havoc with the combinations in the fours boat.

But on the day of the switch Brittain hurt his right ankle badly in a cycling accident. Massive swelling meant he couldn't row properly for the first few days.

"Roger needed a performance to justify the switch," said Brittain, who battled through the pain to row.

When the squad returned to Johannesburg he had a scan which revealed he'd broken his ankle and torn ligaments.

Brittain has been in a moonboot since, taking it off to row because his ankle needs mobility.

But the training has slowed down his recovery, though he's hopeful the boot will come off in the next week.

The injury meant Smith took over the steering duties, usually done by the stroke.

"I've got to look through Lawrence's body – this block in front of me," Smith said with a smile, but Brittain offered no sympathy.

"Johnny's got the skills so it's working at the moment."

One key to their partnership is their desire to work hard.

"We want to push the limits," said Brittain. "We know the rest of the world is training really hard."

The pair, both 29, had their first test in Piediluco, Italy, in mid-April, ending second behind the Romanian outfit that had taken silver at last year's world championships.

Brittain wore the moonboot to the podium to collect his medal.

With many top crews to compete at the World Cup regatta in Poznan from June 21-23, SA's crews will face tough tests.

The regatta is a dress rehearsal for the world championships in Austria later in the year, which also serves as a qualifier for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Destiny is calling.

