

SA rowers excel on the first day of the World Championships

South African rowers gave a good account of themselves on day one of the World Rowing Championships in Aiguebelette, France. The country's five top crews, who are all hoping to qualify for the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio, all finished first or second in their respective heats.

Three of the South African crews are through to Wednesday's quarterfinals, but the remaining two crews will still have to battle it out in tomorrow's Repechage in order to qualify for the semi-finals.

The current world champions in the lightweight double sculls, James Thompson and John Smith, won their heat in 6 minutes 23.01 seconds to qualify for the quarterfinals. The Tuks/HPC crew, who were by far the strongest and most experienced crew in their heat, wisely decided not to overexert themselves. The Mexican crew finished second.

Clocking the fastest times of the day, Kirsten McCann and Ursula Grobler showed that they are definitely one of the strongest teams in the women's lightweight double sculls. Over 500 metres their time was 1:41.58, over 1000 metres it was 3:26.12 and over 1500 metres 5:12.97. It stands to reason that they slowed down over the last 500 metres because they were already six seconds up on the Dutch team.

The South Africans won their heat in 6:59.41 and went through to the quarterfinals.

Shaun Keeling and David Hunt won their heat in the men's pairs in a time of 6:33.26 to progress to the quarterfinals.

Naydene Smith and Lee-Ann Persse finished second in their heat in the women's pairs. Because only one boat automatically qualified for the quarterfinals they will have to compete in the Repechage tomorrow (1/09).

Sizwe Ndlovu, Lawrence Brittain, Vince Breet and Jonty Smith were beaten by a mere second by the Americans in their heat of the men's fours, which means they will also have to compete in the Repechage tomorrow.

Normally Roger Barrow, South Africa's head coach based at the High Performance Centre (HPC) in Pretoria, is not easy to please. He said he was happy with the way the first day played out. However, he emphasized that his rowers should not be under any illusions.

"They fully realize that, although they have done well in their first 'battle', the 'war' is still far from being won. A lot of work still needs to be done by any crew who wants to qualify for the finals and next year's Olympic Games."

Any rower who aspires to represent his/her country at the Games in Rio will have to finish in the top eleven of his respective racing category. To medal will be even tougher. In some categories the rowers will have to compete in five races in eight days.