

Bridgitte Hartley was in awesome form at the South African Sprint Canoeing Championships at the Roodeplaat Dam during Easter weekend. She won five gold and three silver medals.

The racing was certainly a bit tougher than at previous national championships because a visiting team from Singapore was also allowed to compete. This meant that the female rowers had to compete in a semi-final as well as a final in most of the events. Consequently, Hartley had to do 14 races in three days.

She was victorious in the K1 races over 200 metres, 500 metres, 1000 metres and 5000 metres. Hartley and Donna Hattingh won the K2 race over 5000m and Hartley and Hayley Arthur finished second in the K2 races over 200m, 500m and 1000m races.

The High Performance Centre (hpc) sponsored canoeist is moderately satisfied with her results.

“The racing conditions were far from ideal. During two of the three days of racing we had to contend with winds from different directions. At times the wind was from the side, but then it would change into a head wind which made for tough rowing. This means that I cannot really compare my times with international times to see whether I am on track with my training. But I felt good while I was racing so I guess I must be doing something right at this stage,” said the Olympian bronze medallist.

Hartley’s first big test will be in May when she will be competing in a World Cup event in Portugal (14-16 May) and in Germany the week after.

There can be no arguing that Hartley has been a trailblazer for women’s canoeing in South Africa the past eight years. During this period she won two bronze medals at the World Championships (2009 and 2014), as well as a bronze medal at the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

Because of these achievements she can boast to be the first person from both South Africa and the African continent to medal at the ICF Canoe Sprint World Championships.

After winning the bronze medal at last year's World Championships, Hartley was quoted to have said that she believed the best was yet to come. According to her, the 2015 season is the most important in her build-up to the 2016 Rio Games, because 2015 is the qualifying year in the four-year Olympic cycle.

"The current season is important because you have to be top-eight to qualify for the Olympic Games at the World Championships in Italy at the end of August," she said.

The plan was that the Italian, Guglielmo Guerrini, would coach Hartley this year, but unfortunately it did not work out.

"We bumped heads, but don't get me wrong. Guglielmo Guerrini is a good coach but if I did what he wanted me to do I would probably have ended up hating the sport. He wanted to change too much of what had worked for me in the past. He also wanted me to train in Spain for up to three months at a time. Since last year being away from home for such long periods of time began to get me down and I did not even enjoy my training any longer. Furthermore we also had a language problem

"That is why I am training on my own now, but with the support of the hpc and Craig Mustard (KZN Canoe Club) and a biokineticist. And it is working.

"When I go overseas now I will be just as excited as I was a few years ago when my career just started out."