

The South African rowers certainly made their presence felt during the three days of racing at the Memorial Paolo D'Aloja Regatta in Piedilaco, Italy. They won four of the nine finals in which they contested and came second in three of them.

As has become the norm since the 2012 Olympic Games in London, James Thompson and John Smith were able to step up to the plate when it mattered. After a titanic battle between the Italians, Andrea Micheletti and Pietro Ruta, and the two South Africans, the two teams eventually shared the spoils in the men's double sculls.

The South Africans had to dig deep to beat the Italians by 0.34s in Saturday's final. They only managed to catch up and pass the Italians after about 1500m. No wonder Thompson described it as a hard day at the office. Their winning time was 6:25.35.

Today (Sunday) it was the Italians who prevailed. They led during most of the race and at the 1000m mark their lead was 0:01.13 seconds. However, over the last 700 metres Thompson and Smith slowly but surely gained on Micheletti and Ruta and eventually the Italians were able to pip the South Africans by merely 0:00.14 seconds. Their winning time was 6:21.80.

"Tough racing is what we came looking for and we found it. We have got a chance to test out some of the things we have been working on since last year's World Championships. We definitely made some progress and it was good to have the opportunity to test ourselves against some tough crews," Thompson texted.

"Our next test will be the South African Championships in two weeks."

Thompson and his teammates arrive today in South Africa but there is no chance of taking things slightly easier.

“We will be training on Tuesday. As rowers we are more worried about training than resting. It is important that we are out our best when we compete at the World Cup-regattas in Henley and Lucerne.”

The other South African crew, consisting of Kirsten McCann and Ursula Grobler, also gave ‘as good as they got’. On Saturday they won their final in a time of 7:11:05. Italy’s Giulia Pollini and Valentina Rodini were second in 7:17.41, followed by Claire Lambie and Denise Walsh from Ireland in 7:18.99.

Lithuania’s Donata Vistartaite and Milda Valciukaite won the final on Sunday in 7:01.59, with McCann and Grobler second in 7:12.75.

Judging by recent results it would seem that Grobler and McCann are developing into a solid combination. Last year, at the World Rowing Championships in Amsterdam, they came close to a podium finish. Unfortunately they missed out on a bronze medal by a mere second and had to be satisfied with the fourth place. The South Africans won their heat as well as their semi-final at the world championships.

McCann, a former under-23 world champion as well as a winner of gold medals at the World Student Championships and the World Student Games, describes rowing as the most beautiful sport.

“There are so many aspects to rowing. You need a sound technique and have to be physically strong and fit as well to make the boat go faster. Rowing is also a huge mental challenge, especially when competing at the highest level. To really put your body on the line is a big ask.

“What motivates me is the challenge of what is the best I can be...the best this body I have can do. Actually it is amazing how one can keep on challenging your body to keep on producing better and better results.”

On Saturday David Hunt and Shaun Keeling were victorious in the final of the men’s pair. They won the event in a time of 6 minutes and 48.06s. Marco di Costanzo and Matteo Castaldo from Italy finished second in 6:48.47 and Georgios Tziallas and Dionysios Angelopoulos from Greece were third in 6:49.28. However, on Sunday the South Africans only managed to finish in the 4th Place. Tziallas and Angelopoulos won in 6:43.12.

Kate Johnstone kept her best for last to win the women's single sculls race on Sunday in 7:47.94. In Saturday's final she was second in 7:49.80, with Patricia Merz from Switzerland winning in a time of 7:46.88.

Lawrence Ndlovu came 5th on Saturday in the men's single sculls race.