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When the different worlds of athletes and journalists collide it makes for awkward consequences as was the case during the national rowing squad's high-altitude training camp in Lesotho at the end of November 2013.

South African rowing coach Roger Barrow extended an invitation to interested journalists to spend a few days with the athletes at their base on the banks of the Katse Dam, thus giving them the opportunity firsthand to experience what elite rowers go through.

In the small hours of the morning two excited journalists set off from Pretoria on a road trip.

What was supposed to be a four to five hour scenic trip to the Mountain Kingdom turned out to be a 'marathon' rather than a 'sprint'.

At the heart of the problem was the lack of roadside signage once through the Caledonspoort border post and a non-existent Caltex garage. As if the lack of signage was not a challenge enough one had to negotiate a narrow road that was laden with obstacles, from livestock to a dangerous pass riddled with potholes.

When the duo finally found the turnoff after initially missing it and travelling 60 kilometres past their destination and numerous chats to various locals, the scenery towards the escarpment changed dramatically. The painstakingly slow climb up the steep Mafika Lisiu Pass reaches a peak of 3000m above sea level (AMSL) before the road winds down 2100m to the training base in the Motebong Village. They reached the camp after a 500km drive

which took them just short of 10 hours to complete, only to arrive to a squad of rowers who had returned from a 12 kilometre jog following an earlier mountain bike ride.

One of the lessons learnt on the trip is that rowers really dig in during dinner time as they sit down to generous servings of food. The heaped plates would be detrimental to a 'normal' person's waistline but these athletes' burn calories at such a rate due to all the physical exercise they perform each day that it would have little impact on their dress size.

Before the trip the author was convinced that he would join the athletes for a run but thin air makes a simple 30 metre hill seem like a mountain. The thin air does not only effect your breathing but makes you sleep like a baby and even though you fight against the heavy eyelids its lights out before you know it.

The Katse Dam is a magnificent body of water and allows the rowers to paddle for kilometres on end without having to turn around in comparison to their home base at Roodeplaat Dam. The author was fortunate enough in one of the 21 kilometre sessions to be entrusted with one of the rubber ducks by Barrow. With little or no previous knowledge of steering he soon got the grasp and as is the case with most things grew confidence guiding the boat with the one hand and taking photos of the rowers with the other.

Soon he was whisking past the rowers oblivious of the wake he was leaving behind and adding to the obstacles facing the athletes. The massive body of water

coupled by the towering mountains in the background made for beautiful photos of the rowers in this unique setting. "The journalist instinct came out in me and in an effort to steal the perfect photo I cut the engine and positioned myself on the side of the dinghy. Focussed on taking the picture I was happily unaware that my boat was drifting into the path of an unsuspecting rower I resigned myself to the pending collision and I could only give the athlete a half-hearted warning which at this point was too late. With my ego in tatters I apologised profusely while the rower was undeterred by the irritation collision, the paddler smiled politely before he pushed the dinghy out of the way to continue with his training'.

'As is custom with athletes when I got back on solid ground the rowers poked fun at the over-enthusiastic journalist for leaving a backwash but it was all in good fun as new friendships were forged during our visit. What I took from this experience is that be it a journalist, photographer or an elite athlete, when we are focused on getting the best story, most amazing photo or achieving a medal the determination is there and nothing can deter us from this goal'.



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sideline