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South Africa's first America's Cup team: "It's got nothing to do with color."

All aboard

They may not take first prize, but they'll be winners nonetheless: We met the mixed-race crew of the "Shosholozza" while they were training for the world's toughest sailing race

By Michael Bitala

Cape Town, May – Even at first glance, the sea is a forbidding sight. Towering waves rise to heights of three or four meters. It's raining. It's cold. Thick, black clouds scud low across the water. And even the gulls huddled on the jetty don't dare to brave the storm.

But Marcello Burricks is indifferent to the weather. He scrambles over the boat, pulls on the sheets, checks the stern, the bow, and the wheel. Then he goes back to recheck the sheets, the stern, and the sails. His face is mask-like, impassive. Not once does he look in the direction of his 14 fellow crew members. The boat is due to cast off in a few minutes, and if anyone talks to him he simply hisses, "Later." Then he starts darting back and forth again, tugging here, pulling there, not saying a word.

Marcello Burricks has just turned 20, but the scars visible on his bare torso show that life hasn't always treated him kindly. They are old stab wounds, the indelible marks of his past. And of course, Burricks knows that this morning he'll again have to face the usual questions: About his first knife fight at age eight. About how he beat up a teacher at 14. About how he became the youngest member of the sailing team. And about how he copes with being one of South Africa's greatest heroes. Burricks clearly has no interest in answering – he continues scurrying back and forth, while most of his crewmates stand chatting on deck, impervious to the wind and rain.

From gangster to national hero

So this is South Africa's national hero. Later, once the five-hour training session is over, Burricks tells us it's not a role he savors. And who can blame him? Undoubtedly he's a hero – after all, he has succeeded where no one with a comparable background has succeeded before. But does that justify interviewer demands that he divulge every last detail of his life? His skin is café-au-lait brown – or "colored", as they say in South Africa. And that's why he's now a star, a yachtsman-cum-role-model – a shining example for colored and black youths at home and abroad, personifying the transformation of a once segregated nation. Marcello Burricks grew up in a

Cape Town township, was a gang member, and has made a career for himself in a sport that used to be the exclusive provenance of wealthy whites. That's his story – from gangster to yachting star. But he doesn't like to talk about it.

However, there's another story, one inextricably linked with Marcello Burricks' rise to fame, and no less astonishing in its own right. And one that everyone on the sailing team is only too happy to talk about. It's the story of Salvatore Sarno – and of his dream of securing a South African crew a place in the 2007 America's Cup – the world's most grueling yacht race, the maritime equivalent of formula-one racing. That in itself was enough to make some wonder if the South African boss of the Mediterranean Shipping Company (the world's second largest container carrier) wasn't just a little crazy. After all, no African team had ever competed in the America's Cup in the event's 153-year history. But even more people took notice of his decision to sign up not only professional white sailors, but also colored and black youths like Marcello Burricks. Another first for the America's Cup – the race for the ultra-rich, white sailing elite.

But Sarno was adamant. The team had to represent the country, and South Africa is home to black, colored and white people alike. He was backed up by Ian Ainslie, the country's best-known yachtsman. Ainslie runs a school in Cape Town that gives free sailing lessons to black and colored youths, and it was only natural to recruit crew members from there – even if some of them couldn't even swim properly when Ainslie and Sarno took them on. After the boat had been bought and christened *Shosholoza* – which roughly translates as “Roll up your sleeves” or “Look ahead with courage” – Sarno got up in front of the team and told them: “You will not be rich, because we don't have money. But one day President Mbeki will look in your eye, shake your hand and say: ‘South Africa is proud of you.’” Although that day is still to dawn, the nation is now wholeheartedly behind Sarno, his team, and their dream. And when the final of the 32nd America's Cup is held in Valencia, Spain, in 2007, *Shosholoza* will be among the starters.

The full extent of this achievement becomes evident if you consider the fate of another applicant. Even in late April, it was still not clear whether the 2007 Cup would include its first German team. It was only at the eleventh hour, shortly before the final deadline for registrations, that the crew of the Fresh Seventeen finally managed to find a sponsor. The team's entry is currently being heralded as a landmark in German sailing history. The *Shosholoza*, by contrast, secured the support of Deutsche Telekom subsidiary T-Systems some time ago – to the tune of 17 million euros, the largest sponsorship deal with a foreign company in South African history. And of course, this is not an entirely altruistic gesture on T-Systems' part. The *Shosholoza* has already won over the hearts and minds of many sports journalists in the US and

Europe, and America's Cup fans will probably find the remarkable team more appealing than the professionals from the USA, Italy, or even Germany.

Marcello Burricks doesn't crack a smile until the *Shosholoza* finally casts off and heads for the open sea. Then his face lights up with an expression of profound, silent joy. All the while, the *Shosholoza* is being tossed around like a paper boat in a bathtub. The water is only 13 degrees centigrade. Cold waves wash over the boat, and the sailors are in danger of being blown overboard by the wind. Right now, nobody wants to think about what happened a few weeks earlier. During a training session, the team plowed into a whale, not only damaging the boat, but injuring several crewmen, who were pitched into the water. Skipper Geoff Meek still has trouble moving his knee, and others suffered serious gashes and bruises. Moreover, these seas are home not just to whales, but also to a fair number of sharks.

Mention sailing to some, and they go into raptures about the sheer joy of the sport, and the sense of humility in the face of the natural forces of wind and water. But for most people, the word merely conjures up feelings of dizziness and nausea – not least on a day like today, and on a high-speed yacht like the *Shosholoza*. The vessel is 25 meters long and slim as a willow, with gigantic sails and a mast that towers 39 meters above the water. Today, 26-year-old Moctar Fall still gets seasick. The powerfully built black crewman only began sailing last November, but the team wanted him on board, because they still needed a "grinder". These are the strongest men on the boat, and spend hours turning the heavy winch (known as the coffee grinder) that pulls the huge foresail in and out.

Marcello Burricks, by contrast, loves the waves. He relishes the boat leaping over the water, like a flat stone skimming across the ocean. His grandfather was a whaler, his father a fisherman, and the tiny corrugated iron hut he grew up in is only a five-minute walk from the sea. But the white sandy beach is the only idyllic feature of his township. Like most other South African communities of its kind, it is terrorized by violent gangs, who use brute force to defend their turf, and their weapons and drugs deals. "You have no choice but to join one of these groups," says Burricks. "Otherwise, you won't survive."

It's the results that count

Because he was short-tempered, and would fly into a rage when he saw big guys beating up weaker ones, he got into fist and knife fights at an early age. "Fortunately, I was blessed with fast hands, so I could fight anybody." But he takes no pride in his pugilistic past. At 14, one of his friends killed someone and landed up in jail. Today, that friend's a drug addict. A far cry from Burricks, who is set to compete in the world's premier yachting event and has shaken hands with King Juan Carlos of Spain. The Spanish monarch paid a visit when they were in Valencia for a pre-America's Cup regatta. "It might

sound strange,” says Burricks, “but I still find it incredible that sailing could change my life so much.”

Burricks, and Golden Mgedeza and Solomon Dipeere, who grew up in the townships near Johannesburg, got their big break through Ian Ainslie’s sailing school for disadvantaged youths, where their exceptional talent came to the fore. And that’s why all three are angered by some white South Africans’ claims they are only on the *Shosholoza* team because Sarno and Ainslie are aiming for political correctness. “That’s utter nonsense,” says Burricks. “If you don’t make the grade, you’ve no chance of being accepted. It’s got nothing to do with color.” A sentiment shared by everyone on the crew.

For spectators, it can be difficult to appreciate just how much strength and determination the America’s Cup demands. After all, viewed from a safe distance, the race appears to be a fairly sedate affair. The boats simply have to sail from A to B and back again as quickly as possible – sometimes with the wind, sometimes against the wind. But when you’re sitting – or rather dangling – on the *Shosholoza*, there’s no danger of getting bored. The ship often heels so much that the Genoa, the triangular headsail plunges into the water – while the boat is racing through the waves at speeds of almost 30 knots (over 50 kilometers per hour). And while you’re holding on for dear life as the boats tacks and jibes, you can’t afford to take your eyes off the sheets for a split-second. The forces on these kevlar lines are enormous. Even a momentary lapse of attention can spell disaster.

Grinder Sieraj Jacobs (25) hasn’t set foot on the *Shosholoza* since a sheet sheared off the tip of his finger a few weeks ago. And it’s not all plain sailing today, either. After three hours, bowman Golden Mgedeza is distracted for a fraction of a second, and loses control of the swinging spinnaker boom during a jibe. Next thing, Marcello Burricks is sprawled on the deck, winded by a violent blow to his back.

On course for Valencia

Of course, nobody really believes that the *Shosholoza* will win the America’s Cup, even if all the team members will jokingly tell you otherwise. They’d like to make it to the quarter finals, even if their total budget of 20 million euros is only a fifth of what most competitors have at their disposal. The crew has already achieved creditable results in a number of races – taking fourth and fifth places when they appeared hopelessly outclassed. And skipper Geoff Meek has an explanation for why the *Shosholoza* team is already punching above its weight, and might go even further in 2007. He has already competed in the America’s Cup, as a member of a British team. “Everything was so slick, so perfect. It was almost boring. There wasn’t the same incredible team spirit and euphoria as there is on the *Shosholoza*. That could take us a long way.”

But for now it's back to harbor in Cape Town. Marcello Burricks is gradually recovering from the blow to his back. He's not angry with Golden Mgedeza, even if the heavy bruising will make it difficult to move for the next couple of days. But it's the kind of accident that could have happened to anyone. Besides, it was the last training session in South Africa for the time being. The entire crew will now travel to Valencia, Spain, where the new *Shosholoza* will be launched on May 19 – in other words, this coming Thursday. It is the first new America's Cup yacht to be officially presented to the public. The 25 men will then remain in Europe for six months to train and take part in races.

A gigantic crane lifts the old *Shosholoza* out of the water and onto the quayside at the team's base. Marcello Burricks appears almost melancholy as he stands, uncharacteristically motionless, contemplating the decommissioned yacht. "It was a good boat," he says. "But I'm looking forward to the new *Shosholoza*. She'll be even faster and better than the old one."

And if there's one thing he's looking forward to even more than the new yacht, it's showing their America's Cup rivals a thing or two. The longer he talks, the more he warms to his audience, laughing and joking, and fielding all those questions. "You journalists are only ever after one thing," he says. "You want to know about the color of my skin and where I come from. You're not all that interested in sailing." But he does understand the motivation. "It's only been 11 years since apartheid ended," says Burricks. "When you stop asking me about the color of my skin, when that's not an issue anymore, then I'll know that South Africa has become a normal country."

((Picture caption))

Setting course for a better country: Professional white sailors and black and colored youths from the townships – 11 years after the demise of apartheid the Shosholoza is sailing with the wind of change.