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'Home' Dusi glory beckons for Khwela

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Durban - Between the names of McGregor and Birkett, it is hard to think of the upcoming FNB Dusi Canoe Marathon and not mention Sbonelo Khwela, as a frontrunner for the prestigious title.

The dark horse for the race, Khwela has seen the Dusi flash by him as he was growing up near the adjacent Shong-weni dam, uplifting himself from a rural upbringing to become a real ambassador for the sport's growing black populous.

The 29-year-old embodies the spirit of canoeing with his big laugh, determined attitude and humble demeanour; humble to a fault perhaps as he will never tell you his fastest time over Burma Road - a 3km straight-up-and-down portage - which he seems to fly through.

The paddling star has spread his Red Bull-sponsored wings to do more than just sit in a canoe; he utilises his running prowess in trail- running events, even more challenging endurance events - such as the non-stop Dusi - as well as important charity work at the Liv Village, which looks after vulnerable and orphaned children, creating jobs in his own village and being an ambassador for Martin Dreyer's "Change a Life" academy.

It was this academy that spotted something indomitable in Khwela, when, after he turned 16, wouldn't give up trying to keep upright in a canoe at his first go.

"I first got into a canoe when some friends asked if I wanted to try paddle a bit on Shongweni Dam," Khwela said.

"I had seen these boats before on the roofs of cars, but I was a soccer player, and I thought 'maybe it will be fun!' I got in and just couldn't stay upright, but my friends all got it quickly and paddled away. After that I just kept trying and wanted to get it right."

Khwela was approached by Dreyer and his academy, looking for guys who wanted to make a real go at canoeing. He was determined to shine.

All they needed, from equipment to nutrition was provided, with the paddlers giving over their determination.

"Martin wanted guys who would be serious about paddling," he said. "They gave us everything we needed, from USN supplements to shoes, the boats and paddles. I was determined to do well and worked hard to improve."

It did not take Khwela long to announce himself on one of South Africa's iconic paddles, the Dusi, and one that is very close to home for him. With the Dusi being as much of a run as a paddle, Khwela used his ability on land to make a charge for the title in 2013, only to slip at the final hurdle.

Leading on day one and two, everything that could go right for the Shongweni local was going right. Birkett had crashed out, he had a steady lead over Lance Kime, and there was just one more rapid to go. Pumphouse Weir, however, became his undoing as he took an unexpected swim and watched Kime scoop the title, ending in third.

It may not have been the win that would have caused fireworks all across the paddling fraternity, but it was his announcement on to the scene. So much so that Birkett teamed up with Khwela the next year to race in a K2 - and win.

Now, with the 2017 K1 edition looming large on February 16, Khwela is still being incredibly humble when looking at his chances.

But as this star continues to grow, you have to feel that an outright win in his "home race" can't be far off.

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