



### Weather Update: Cold front promises much-needed rain in Western Cape

A cold front is due to make landfall in the Western Cape on Tuesday bringing rain, while high fire danger conditions and

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## Enabling KZN's raw talent

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Nondumiso Zakwe, The Witness

### The Witness

Mention Martin Dreyer and sports fans will regale you with tales of his astonishing endurance feats.

He has, after all, won the Dusi Marathon seven times. And this year the rugged local man won the Freedom Challenge — a 2 300km race by bicycle across South Africa — in a mind-boggling record of 10 days, six hours and 40 minutes.

But sporting success is not Dreyer's overwhelming motivation. Instead the 48-year-old seems to get far more satisfaction from helping a set of young South Africans to overcome their disadvantages.

Born in Barberton, near Swaziland, Dreyer emigrated to the United States in 1992 after completing his BCompt degree at the University of Cape Town to avoid compulsory military service.

"It [defending apartheid] just didn't seem like a worthwhile fight to be a part of. I then moved to Canada and lived there for six years," he recalls.

In 1999, the Capetonian-turned-Midlander returned to South Africa and marked his return to the country with his maiden Dusi win.

Today he dedicates that win to the late veteran canoeist Graeme Pope-Ellis, the 15-time Dusi winner, for taking him under his wing.

"The top paddlers were very secretive with their river knowledge. But Pope showed me the river and shared his knowledge. I didn't expect to win in 1999 but I did, and so I kept doing it for 10 years."

Pope-Ellis was killed in a freak accident on his farm in 2010.

Dreyer says his real life-changing moment came in 2008 after he won his seventh title with young protege Thulani Mbanjwa — the first black person to win the race.

"It was his first win and my seventh. I only had more wins because of my privileged white support structure. I had far more opportunities than him."

But it was seeing the struggles of Mbanjwa's young friends in that race that convinced Dreyer to dedicate his future to helping them. Their performance had been below what he had expected after seeing them train, and he believed this was a consequence of their disadvantaged circumstances.

In 2009, Dreyer started his Change A Life Academy to give support and guidance to previously disadvantaged paddlers from the Valley of a Thousand Hills.

"Computershare sponsored my dream to try and get 10 of Thulani's friends in the top 50. One of the obligations though, was that I don't race the Dusi but focus on the athletes. I didn't realise that my 2008 win would be my last, but it's the best decision I ever made. I then realised that I could not live in Cape Town and run my academy, so I moved to Pietermaritzburg."

He has no regrets about relocating to "homely Pietermaritzburg" with his wife and two children.

"We love Pietermaritzburg. It's a small town but very impactful. I came here by default but I love it and, strangely, people think I'm from here," he said. He says his proudest moment was watching all his "Zulu" athletes come in the top 36 in 2009, with Sbonelo Khwela and Lucas Mthalane in the top 10.



Martin Dreyer with Thomas Ngidi and Eric Zondi after they came third in the 2010 Dusi Canoe Marathon. (File)

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The academy has since branched out into running and mountain biking. In 2015, one of his prospects, mountain biking star John Ntuli claimed a historic triumph at the first Munga from Bloemfontein to Wellington. KZN-born Ntuli completed the 1 070-km, non-stop event in 69 hours and 10 minutes. "It almost makes me sad to think about what other talent there is in other rural areas."

"I feel privileged and fortunate to be able to add value into their lives."

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