

## World Champions Return Home

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Wednesday, 23 September 2009  
Last Updated Wednesday, 23 September 2009

Johannesburg - The successful South African Marathon Kayaking team returned to a hero's welcome yesterday, proudly showing off two new World Champions. Gauteng brothers Grant and Brandon van der Walt both won the World title in their respective K1 age groups – a first in world marathon paddling history. Senior K2 silver medalist Shaun Rubenstein was also celebrated for his outstanding result with partner Ant Stott, who is in England for a week.

The past weekend's ICF Marathon World Championships in Portugal were widely recognised as the toughest yet raced, with the highest turnout of returning champions ever. Younger brother Brandon van der Walt got the regatta off to the ideal start for South Africa on Friday morning, when he raced a tactically astute race belying his 17 years to win the gold medal in the opening Junior U18 Men's event.

"It was a huge honour to win the Junior title because my older brother [Grant] had won it before. It was also something for my parents. They have sacrificed so much to help my paddling so it was a good way to say thank you and repay them," said Brandon. He crossed the line to rapturous shouting and screaming from the large SA team, who had lined the bank flying flags and blowing vuvuzela's. Brandon also predicted his brother's win later in that afternoon.

Grant's K1 victory in the U23 race backed up the Junior title he won two years ago in Hungary. This was the first year the International Canoe Federation included the U23 as a stand-alone marathon class, and the event was raced at a very high standard. The powerhouse 19-year-old had to deal with a delayed start to his event, and then recover from a capsized at the end of the first portage. Such was his strength of character, that he quickly put these behind him to control the rest of the race and leave all challengers in his wake on the finish line.

The Senior Men's K2 event that took place on Sunday afternoon was one of the highlights of the weekend. It featured a host of previous winners and set off at an incredibly fast pace.

"The first 1.5km to the turn was one of the hardest of my life. Every boat was just so fast and the attacks and surges of maximum speed were non-stop all the way to the first turn," said defending K2 World Champion Ant Stott afterwards. "Our heart rates were through the roof, and we did our best to try and relax slightly before the first portage. It was World Champs though, so you can't expect to come into the race and not have to go through scary amounts of physical pain," he added.

The first portage split the field up, with the South Africans finding themselves in a four boat breakaway up front. "All three crews behind us were known for their strong grinding ability, so we had to work hard to make sure that we were not caught. In our group the Czech boat had a very strong pull and they weren't scared to use it, which helped keep us clear from the rest of the field," explained previous K1 World Champion Shaun Rubenstein.

The bunch stayed together until the last portage, where the South Africans put in slightly after the Spanish boat. Feeling good, and with 250m to the finish line, Rubenstein and Stott decided to make their move. They pulled up alongside and then overtook them, but the Spaniards came back and edged in front to win by a boatlength on the line.

"Even though it was disappointing not to win gold, the Spanish were the stronger crew on the day and deserved to win," said a humble Rubenstein after the race.

The sprint ace had raced a titanic K1 race the day before, which was described as one of the most exciting races Marathon has ever seen. After a bad start, Rubenstein staged an amazing fight back to claw his way onto the front bunch by the fourth lap of seven, but there was not enough in the tank for the tough endsprint and he missed out on a medal by two seconds.

Stott and Rubenstein's silver means both athletes have now won four Senior World Marathon medals, including gold and bronze – a unique achievement in South African paddling.

Most of the paddlers now travel to Cradock in the Eastern Cape to take part in the Hansa Powerade Fish River Canoe Marathon from 2-3 October, while Rubenstein takes a well-earned rest after an intense season.

