

# Nemato rowing lessons in life

**Nemato, South Africa, is not your usual place to find a thriving rowing club. The township is tiny, impoverished and education is lacking. But rowers from the Nemato (Nelson Mandela Township) Rowing Club, under the guidance of Coach Jan Blom, are making a name for themselves and building new attitudes around them.**

A series of events brought Dutch coach Blom to Nemato. He originally arrived to visit the family of his partner, but Blom came to love the area and subsequently moved there. To Blom's surprise Nemato sits next to one of the best rowing spots in South Africa, the Kowie River.

"In no time I was coaching for Rhodes University, one of the best rowing universities in South Africa."

"With the river so close to the township, everybody in the township knows rowing. Living in the township and coaching for Rhodes, many kids asked me, 'when are you starting a rowing club for us?'"

This was the start of the Nemato Rowing Club.

"It took me two years before there was enough funding to make a start. In mid-2005 we started

swimming lessons and at the end of that year we had enough boats to start rowing."

But Blom went one step further. The club is not just about rowing; it is about building life skills to empower youth from this predominantly poor community. Despite lacking role models, Blom says recruiting rowers is easy. Those interested are mainly high school students and natural selection picks who will continue.

"The dedication we demand is very unusual here and most kids disappear after a while. Only those who can make the change in mindset and start attending all sessions will make it to competition. It is a purely natural selection.

"Those who stay develop a very dedicated and competitive lifestyle. That is what our club is all about; developing a mindset to become



successful, not necessarily in rowing, but in life. That is desperately needed in a township that has not been able to shake off the legacy of apartheid, where most people live in poverty, and the general mindset is one of apathy.

"We carefully look after this development in our rowers. We expose the rowers to as many new experiences as possible. Anything like taking them to a movie is new and exciting. Also going to competition, to the big cities, is new as well as meeting kids from the elite schools, travelling and eating together with them, competing >

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> against them; sometimes losing, sometimes winning; being equals."

Blom uses rowing as the vehicle to teach them everything else especially a new mindset. "That is 90 per cent of what is needed to get somewhere in life. The other 10 per cent is education. The quality of education here is very poor. To address this problem we offer our rowers extra lessons in mathematics and English. We look at each individual rower and decide how he or she can get the right education that will offer them the best opportunities in life."

The Nemato Rowing Club operates out of a storage container with boats kept under trees outside and an office in the township that doubles as Blom's house. "The office is also used by the rowers. It is their only access to computers and internet and their only chance to develop crucial computer skills."

Already Blom can proudly point to achievements. From small beginnings, 22 rowers competed in the 2008 season. Former club captain Athenkosi Hlekani is the first person from the rowing club to go to university. And now a second, Lubabalo Matthews, has received a bursary to go. They both now row for the University of Johannesburg. In 2006 the club won the Jack Cheetham Award for the best sport development project in South Africa.

And the ideas keep flowing. Blom hopes to develop a club house where rowers can go after

school for homework support, computer classes, a good meal and shower and, of course, rowing sessions. Blom is also looking into starting a school and establishing a provincial sports academy in Port Alfred.

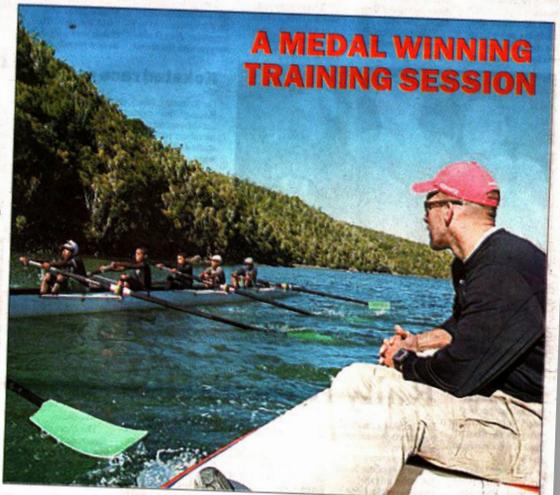
Blom welcomes visitors from other countries and recently a volunteer from the United States, Aaron Block, stayed for six months helping to coach and run the club.

■ M.S.B.

Website: [www.matinyanafund.org.za](http://www.matinyanafund.org.za)

# Cech, mate of Nemato

■ The youngsters at famed rowing club get help from a former Olympic medallist



**ELRE VAN HEERDEN**  
 THE Nemato Rowing Club had a special treat at the weekend, being trained by South African Olympic medallist Donovan Cech. Cech took part in two Olympic Games, the first in Sydney in 2000, where he finished in sixth place in the coxless pairs event with partner Roman di Clemente. The duo teamed up again in 2004 in Athens and won a bronze medal.  
 Cech rowed internationally for 10 years, but quit recently after injuring his back.  
 "I have been down here as a student myself. I have been assisting with St Andrews for the last two years. That is how I got to know about the Nemato Rowing Club."  
 "It's nice to be able to coach a lot of new faces. I support the Nemato Rowing Club 110 per cent. It's a great club and they are doing SA rowing, and I hope that they continue to grow," said Cech.  
 He will be moving to Grahamstown in the near future to help with the different clubs in the area.  
 The Nemato club has held a special holiday training programme on how to fix boats.  
 "They were very eager. Some were waiting, even when I got there an hour early," said head coach and Nemato founder Jan Blom.  
 Blom said it was a challenge to keep the young rowers motivated in winter.  
 "We try to organise some special events to get the rowers excited. Unfortunately we are financially unable to show them a bigger world than our small township and the Kowie," he said.  
 At the moment Blom is focusing on 11 of the most dedicated rowers.  
 "We identified those with the best attendance and offered them 'elite' status. From this month the group will have more sessions and will be the first to qualify for whatever extras we can afford.  
 This reward for hard work is in line with our aim to empower our youth and encourage a competitive mindset and commitment," he said.

**It's nice to be able to coach a lot of new faces. I support the Nemato Rowing Club 110 percent. It's a great club and they are doing wonders**

Donovan Cech, a South African Olympic medallist for rowing, visited Port Alfred to help coach the Nemato Rowers on Saturday.

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## Township rowers win prize

By DAVID MACGREGOR  
 Port Alfred Bureau

A GROUP of township youngsters demonstrated true sporting grit when they beat two of South Africa's top private schools in a prestigious rowing regatta.

Nine youngsters from Port Alfred's Nelson Mandela Township (Nemato) Rowing Club surprised the experts this weekend when they placed 10th out of 14 teams in the annual Schools' Boat Race on the Kowie River.

Despite their lowly placing, they still beat big names like Bishop's College from Cape Town and Grey High School from Port Elizabeth.

For their efforts they scooped the "Most Improved Boys - Boat Race 2007" trophy at what is one of the biggest regattas on the rowing calendar.

Team coach Jan Blom, who previously trained some members of Holland's World Cup team, yesterday said obvious disadvantages like living in tiny township shacks and the daily grind of poverty had not stopped the boys from beating some of the best teams around.  
 "Some kids are so poor they go to bed at night hungry. Their parents



**DETERMINATION:** Jan Blom works on boat maintenance as Ricardo Braaf, 16, works out on a rowing machine in the crammed Nemato Clubhouse. Picture: DAVID MACGREGOR

malnutrition when they were tested recently - yet they still beat some of the best around. They are all heart," Blom said.

Competing in the gruelling 6.2km race, the Nemato boys finished the weekend races and left for home before the prize giving, without even knowing they had won the sought-after trophy.

"They only found out they had won when they arrived the next day to train and it is the first racing trophy the club has ever won," Blom said.

When Blom first moved to South Africa three years ago, he trained the Grey High School team before deciding to move to Port Alfred and mentor township youngsters.

Affectionately called *Mlungu* (white person), Blom lives in a small RDP matchbox in Nemato and trains the youngsters from their humble clubhouse.

Blom said every day, the 50 odd racers he is now training walk to the nearby river to train.

"Unlike other schools, we do this every day, all year round. One day we will open a sports academy in Port Alfred and be able to properly feed and house the kids. It is not just about winning; it is about hard work - at school and on the water."

cannot pay R100 a year school fees or even buy them a pair of school shoes. They also all showed clear signs of

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