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From lockdown struggles to boat race glory: the rise of UCT's student-athlete



Thomas White

Photo: Robin Thuynsma

For 23-year-old Thomas White, who will graduate with a BSc (Eng) in Mechanical & Mechatronic Engineering on Monday, 8 September 2025, the waters of Zeekoevlei Lake and the lecture halls of the University of Cape Town (UCT) have been twin arenas of discipline and discovery – places where resilience, determination and a pursuit of excellence have shaped both his rowing and academic journeys.

“Starting university during the pandemic was incredibly isolating,” White recalled. “The protocols kept me from meeting new people, and I struggled with the lack of community that makes university life special.”

The isolation took a toll on his mental and physical well-being. "I was not handling COVID-19 lockdown well in the first couple of months; my mental state took a serious hit. I put on a lot of weight and generally wasn't very happy," he said. However, he credits his parents for helping him stay grounded and emphasised the importance of maintaining a routine. "You need to distinguish between your workplace and your home space," he advised, highlighting the significance of setting boundaries to stay productive and healthy both mentally and physically.

At the UCT Rowing Club, White found more than a sport – he discovered a community, a sense of belonging, and a supportive team that became like family.

White was born and raised in Cape Town and attended Rondebosch Boys High School, where his passion for rowing began. "I started rowing at school. I had some very good coaches throughout the years which led me to some degree of success at school, but when I came to UCT, I learned the value of enjoying what you do and how it can impact your performance in a sustainable fashion. In 2023 we employed a new coach named Evelien Griffioen, and she was phenomenal."

Griffioen played a crucial role in shaping White's approach, ensuring he and his teammates balanced academics and athletic training. "She made us focus on our mental health, our academics, and despite that, there was still enough time for us to go and train and achieve the results we were hoping for."

Rising through the ranks

In his third year, White became the men's captain. Under his leadership, the men's squad achieved remarkable success, winning the University Sport South Africa (USSA) Sprints Regatta and earning multiple medals. The crowning achievement came at the Universities Boat Race, where UCT triumphed in the Men's A Division – a feat not accomplished since 2001.

The following year, he accepted the challenge of becoming the club chairperson, a role he found as both exhilarating and daunting. "I was worried about stretching myself too thin," he said.

Balancing the demands of his final year, planning tours and mentoring younger athletes as a coach for the South African College High School (SACS) U16s team tested his limits. However, through hard work and strategic time management, he led UCT to another victory at the Universities Boat Race, marking only the second back-to-back USSA win in UCT's history since 1986/87.

Balancing academics and athletics

Although White had a demanding schedule, he excelled academically. "To excel academically you've got to make it happen; no one else is going to do it for you. When you love what you do, you make it work. It's about allocating time in your day for your academics as well as your sports. Academics come first, but it's possible to juggle both."

His dedication was clear in his daily schedule: training at Zeekoevlei from 05:00 to 07:00 before heading to lectures or squeezing in evening sessions after tutorials. Through it all, he credits his success to the support of his coaches, lecturers, teammates, parents and the UCT sports administrators.

White continues to make an impact in both rowing and academia. As vice-chair of the USSA-Rowing executive and first team coach at SACS, he is giving back to the sport that shaped him. Simultaneously, he contributes to the academic world as a tutor in UCT's [Department of Mechanical Engineering](#).

White said that his passion for mechanical engineering developed over time. "I wouldn't say I really enjoyed it at first, but throughout the years, I've realised that it's a very passionate profession where people are collaborating to solve real-world problems. I've been able to draw many parallels from my experiences in rowing into engineering and I've been privileged to encounter many engineers who really love what they do. It's great to work in an environment with such an awesome bunch of people."

His experience with rowing has taught him invaluable life lessons. "Running a club is not easy. It takes a lot of administration and being able to deal with people effectively. However, it's about realising that the members elected you because they believed in you and consequentially, you have an obligation to do all that you can for them."

Looking ahead

White has ambitious goals for the future, both in rowing and engineering. He aspires to win the upcoming boat races and hopefully represent South Africa at the World Student Games next year. "I'm turning 24 this year, and next year will be my last opportunity to represent South Africa at the Student Games. I'm ready to commit to that and achieve the dream" he said.

His advice to aspiring student-athletes is simple yet profound: "Find something you love, and you'll find a way to make it happen."

Story by Myolisi Gophe, UCT News

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