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UCT Rowing Club makes history with third consecutive USSA Boat Race title



UCT Rowing Club won the USSA Boat Race title for the third year in a row.
Photo: University Sports South Africa

The University of Cape Town's (UCT) Rowing Club has solidified its position as a national powerhouse by winning the University Sports South Africa (USSA) Boat Race title for an impressive third consecutive year. This remarkable achievement is the first time for any university since the 1980s, marking the beginning of a new era of excellence for UCT Rowing Club.

Earlier this September, UCT's men's crew claimed a commanding victory on the Kowie River in Port Alfred, adding yet another gold to the club's illustrious record. The win marked a historic milestone – before 2023, UCT Men had secured the title only four times, with their

last triumph in 2001. Three consecutive victories in 2023, 2024 and 2025 have set a new standard.

“For anyone who knows rowing history, this is huge,” said the club’s outgoing president, Oliver Kane-Smith, a final-year mechanical engineering student. “No one in the current crew had even been born when UCT last won in 2001. To break that drought, and then keep the streak alive for three years, has been incredibly special.”

The 2023 breakthrough victory was the culmination of years of determined progress. In Kane-Smith’s first year at UCT, the crew finished third. They improved to second the following year – before finally achieving the long-awaited triumph.

“That journey – third, second, then first – says a lot about the club’s resilience,” he reflected. “It wasn’t an overnight success. It was learning, building and growing together.”

The winning streak has boosted club morale and re-energised its alumni network. “Winning is rare. So, when alumni see us doing this, they know the hard work behind it. Their support and pride have meant so much.”

Winning as students first

Kane-Smith said that the secret to UCT’s dominance lies in balance. Unlike professional crews, student athletes must split their time between demanding degrees, training and everyday life.

“What we’ve done well is become excellent amateurs,” he said. “We know our limits. We don’t train like professionals because we can’t – academics and mental health come first. But within those boundaries, we maximise everything. That’s been the difference.”

This approach has allowed the team to sustain high performance without burning out. “If someone has a big project due, we adapt. Because a stressed rower won’t perform at their best anyway. That flexibility keeps us competitive while making sure we still succeed academically.”

Success has been achieved despite facing financial limitations. “We do get some assistance from the university, but rowing is expensive, and budgets are tight,” Kane-Smith admitted.

The club has responded with a long-standing novice programme, designed to make rowing accessible to newcomers. “We try to keep costs down – I’d say lower than most other universities. It’s not easy, but we pride ourselves on being inclusive.”

Despite this, the financial strain is significant. Budgets have not increased in five years, while expenses – especially post-COVID-19 – have risen sharply. “It’s tough, but we have a strong committee, and a lot of institutional knowledge helps us cope. We’ve learned to be resourceful.”

A shared triumph

While the men's team has received significant attention, the women's team is also making strides, finishing in second place this year despite starting the season with limited numbers. “Their growth has been phenomenal,” he said. “It shows the club’s depth and what’s possible in the years ahead.”

For Kane-Smith, the boat race victories represent both closure and legacy. "It's my last year, and to leave with three consecutive titles feels surreal. I stand on the shoulders of everyone who came before me – this is a club effort across generations."

He is confident UCT Rowing's momentum will continue. "I've had my time, and now it's time for change. But I don't see this success slowing down. History shows the club goes through cycles, and all it takes is a few passionate people to drive it forward. Right now, the passion is strong."

Evidently, UCT's growing stature was highlighted earlier this year when rower Stefan Breytenbach represented South Africa at the World Student Games held in Germany. "That shows the talent coming out of UCT Rowing," Kane-Smith said.

Story by Myolisi Gophe, UCT News

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