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UCT student crowned canoe ocean racing world champion



Nicholas Notten

Photo: Supplied

University of Cape Town (UCT) master's student Nicholas Notten won the Canoe Ocean Racing World Championships that were held in Lanzarote, Spain, from 4 to 6 July 2021. The world championships drew more than 250 competitors across multiple divisions from juniors up to masters from over 20 countries.

The International Canoe Federation (ICF) Ocean Racing World Championships is an annual international race for long-distance surfskis, or sea kayaks, where all the competitors race in one event for the world title. The format is a 27 km point-to-point

race. Michelle Burn ensured a double gold for South Africa by winning the women's race.

Notten completed his undergraduate studies at UCT and is currently registered for a Master of Science in Medicine by dissertation. The 25-year-old's area of focus is monitoring training load, specifically in kayaking. In addition to kayaking and his postgraduate studies, he also runs a tutoring service for high school students.

He was born in Cape Town and lives near the ocean. "At some point I started doing junior, surf, lifesaving, which led me to senior lifesaving," he said. In turn, being a surf lifesaver led him to competitive sea kayaking. "In surf lifesaving there are various races in the different lifesaving crafts, one of which is the surfski. This is similar to the ocean racing kayaking."

Pandemic challenges

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible for international competitions to take place during the past 18 months. The recent world championship was the first large international race since November 2019.

This year the ICF teamed up with the Lanzarote kayak and surfski clubs to hold this event. Lanzarote is the fourth-largest of the Canary Islands, an autonomous division of Spain. It is 125 km off the north coast of Africa and 1 000 km from mainland Spain.

"The preparation was a little bit on and off unfortunately because of the COVID crisis, and us South Africans not knowing if we would be able to make it [to Lanzarote]," Notten said. "I just kept my head down. I was very optimistic and, in the end, it worked out for us."

The South African team, which normally has 30 or more members, consisted of only eight competitors. This was due mainly to pandemic-related reasons such as travel restrictions.

"The conditions we had for the race were a 1.8 m swell with a 20-knot wind," Notten said. "For the race I maintained an average speed of 3:21 minutes per kilometre, finishing almost a minute ahead of the second-placed paddler."

Sports development

Notten is currently in Germany, having been travelling within Europe since the world championships. "I am fortunate with being very flexible with my degree and am able to cover my responsibilities entirely online," he said. He will likely be returning to South Africa towards the end of July.

The UCT student believes that holding this and other competitions is critical for the development and survival of all sports at all levels, be it school, university, national and international level. "I am just very happy that we were able to hold a high-profile race in these times. It is a massive win for the sport," Notten said.

"For UCT and South Africa, it is great to have people involved in [sea kayaking] who are not only participants, but are also at the pinnacle of the sport," he added. "For me

personally, it means a great deal. I am very honoured to have the title, and grateful to have had the opportunity to race and represent South Africa.”

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