



GEMINI FACTORY TEAM'S PILOTS

Dave Barnett & Tjaart Oosthuizen

For the fifth consecutive year, Dave and Tjaart were the winners of the Rat Race Media Trans Agulhas, regarded as the world's Toughest Inflatable Boat Race.

Q: How did you guys meet?

We met in 1999, through rubber duck racing. We were both racing rubber ducks in different teams, and upon meeting at a race we just 'clicked'!

Our very first race together was the Blaauwberg National Surf Race - which we won! It was the perfect start to what has been an incredible eight years of racing together. We have become the best of friends and share a passion for racing, and this is what we attribute our success to.

Q: How did you guys get into the sport of racing inflatables?

"I'm from Australia," says David, "where this design of boat was introduced in about 1996. I worked for an Importer of Gemini Inflatables, and from my first ride on one, I was hooked on Inflatable Boating. My first race was an Australian National Series which we won for four consecutive years. That was my

introduction, and I came to South Africa to compete in the Nationals and the Trans Agulhas."

"In 1997 I was watching a television program documenting inflatable boat racing and I first felt a passion to get involved in the sport," says Tjaart. "I decided there and then that this was what I wanted to do, and started putting myself out there. In 1998 I joined the Hunter's Gold Team as backup – and in 1999 I took part in my first Inflatable Boat Race as a co-pilot. There has been no looking back since!"

Q: Give us a brief explanation of what happens in a race.

Basically the start procedure is as follows:

All boats enter the water at the 10 minute mark, lining up parallel to the shore. The boats are held in position by the co-pilot only (if sea conditions are favourable) while the pilot returns to the beach for a Le Man's style start. At the drop of a flag, time is on and the pilot runs to his boat, inserts the kill switch, starts up and goes.

In the longhaul section, each day varies in length and has a different number of

beach stops (checkpoints). These beach stops are compulsory as you have to give your boat number to an official on the beach. Each beach generally has variable sea conditions which can be quite difficult to negotiate at times. Some longhaul legs will also require a fuel stop as we only carry limited amounts of fuel. These beach stops are critical to the outcome of your race because plenty of time can be lost or gained at each one. The finish of the longhaul section is at a designated beach with a chequered buoy 50 m from the shore. You pass around the buoy and beach the boat, and the co-pilot runs over the finish line.

Q: Tell us a bit about what it's like racing these boats?

It's hard to explain – there's nothing quite like it! The Gemini Zapcat weighs approximately 100 kg and has a 50 HP motor. It doesn't sound like much, but the power to weight ratio is phenomenal. The Gemini tunnel hull design basically means you are riding on a cushion of air and a very small welled surface area, which equates to very little drag. Depending on which class you enter, you can get speeds



The winning Gemini Factory Team.

of up to 90-95 kph. Obviously travelling at these speeds in a 4.1 m boat that weighs only 100 kg feels unbelievable – especially in the open sea. The boats are an amazing design.

Q: What makes your boat special compared to one that a reader would have?

The boats are built according to the measurements of that year's model; they are all handmade, therefore no two boats are exactly the same. But our Gemini Factory Team boat is made to the same specifications as the production boats, so there is no difference between ours and the ones your readers would buy from Gemini. This is why it is such a great sport – success or failure comes down to the skill of the team.

Q: Gemini is your main sponsor. Is there a particular reason why you choose to use this craft?

"Gemini was the first make of boat I ever sat in." says David, "I was given an opportunity to race a Gemini boat in

Australia, and because of their support, I have been loyal to them ever since. When I arrived in South Africa, the Gemini guys showed me around their factory. Albert Lombard was especially helpful to me, and I feel that my success is due to all of the knowledge that he passed onto me."

"Gemini boats are reliable and built to perfection – which suits us in all water conditions," says Tjaart. "We would like to thank everyone at Gemini for all their help and support over the last 10 years."

Q: How many Trans Agulhas have you guys competed in? And how many have you won?

We have competed in ten Trans Agulhas races. We finished in 1st place five times, 3rd place three times, 5th place once, and believe it or not, we finished 10th in our first race!

In the Trans Agulhas which has just passed, you went from 44th position to 4th in one race. What went wrong and how did you manage to do so well?

The first day is about 180 km long with a fuel stop at Swartvlei. We came into the checkpoint at Brenton on Sea (the last one before our fuel stop) and there was a bit of a shore break. While I was running around the marshal, David was hit by a wave and couldn't prevent the boat being capsized onto the beach. Fortunately the motor wasn't running, but it had still taken on a lot of water and sand. Together we flipped it over, and were overwhelmed by dismay! All we could think about was that all the preparations and money spent were now worthless.

After sitting in dead silence for what seemed to be forever (only 5 minutes though), we decided to pull the plugs, drain the carbs and pump all of the water out. About ten minutes later we were back on the water. We arrived at Swartvlei for our fuel stop and were told we were lying 44th.

After this, we made sure that there were no more mistakes in the following four beach stops. It's amazing how fast you can go when the adrenalin is

pumping and you have a bit of sand in your motor. We arrived at the finish in Mossel Bay, surprised to see only three boats on the beach ahead of us – not a bad effort!

Q: What goes through your mind leading up to a racing event?

Firstly we think about the equipment – we double-check all of it. Ensuring that all is in working order is our main objective. Any equipment failure will cost you the race. Then we think about the race, the course, about obstacles that may occur – basically running the race in our heads repeatedly.

Q: How many hours do you train and what exactly does it entail?

For us, the only way to prepare our bodies is by spending time in the boat. We did approximately 1 500 km in training last year, roughly about 2 hours each time we went out. Another factor that assists us is working out at a gym and jogging 5 km at least four times a week.

Q: Are there any special requirements becoming a pilot/co-pilot?

Yes, in order to be a pilot, you need to have a skipper's certificate, and you must join a local club to gain racing experience. A co-pilot must have navigational skills, be very fit, and it helps to be a little crazy as well!

The RRM TransAgulhas is an endurance event, both the pilot and co-pilot need to be mentally and physically strong.

Q: What are all of your achievements to date?

We have been:

Trans Atlantic Champions 2004

Trans Agulhas Champions (past five years)

Australian Tri-Nations Champions 2000

SA National Champions

(three consecutive years)

SA National Longhaul Champions

(three consecutive years)

SA National Surf Champions

(three consecutive years)

Western Province Club Champions

(four consecutive years)

Western Province Longhaul Champions

(two consecutive years)

We've been awarded:

Sprinbok colours in 2000 and 2004

Western Province colours

(four consecutive years)

Q: When you guys aren't racing, what are you doing?

"I do a bit of off-road endurance riding as well as some road riding. Basically I enjoy anything that involves speed. Over the last 7 years I have also spent time driving a semi-rigid from the waterfront in Cape Town, doing charters to Clifton and Camps Bay. I also like to just chill and relax," David tells us.

Tjaart said, "Over the past few years, I have enjoyed the sport of quad biking and see myself as quite a sports fanatic. I am a serious businessman and try to achieve the same level of success

at work that I have when racing with David. I aim to excel at everything I set out to accomplish."

Q: The Trans Agulhas is called the world's toughest race. Have you ever feared for your life during an event?

No, can't say that we have feared for our lives. There was, however, a Trans Agulhas race that David took part in in 1998 when a gale force NW wind hit his boat while they were passing Betty's Bay on the last day of the race. The race had been stopped at Kleinmond, but by that time twelve boats had already passed through that check-point, and David's boat was one of them. Going around Hangklip with huge swells and gale force winds wasn't David's idea of fun! The race had become about survival. It was chaotic, but David's Gemini made it to Rooi Els where they were stopped due to the danger of racing in such conditions.

Q: What would a good starting kit for a racing inflatable consist of and about how much would it cost?

You would need full safety gear – lifejackets, helmets, wetsuits, gloves, etc., at least 3 fuel tanks, 2 props – the full cost would really depend on the condition of the boat, motor and trailer. To give you an idea, as a first-timer you could purchase a used standard motor (that hasn't been raced with) for approximately R10 000 – R15 000, although you would have to spend a further R5 000 reinforcing it for racing.

Your secondhand boat would cost approximately R10 000 and props about R3 000 to R5 000 each. As you can see, it starts to add up. If you want your kit to be reliable and be able to finish races, you have to be prepared to spend the money to make sure your equipment doesn't break. It is an expensive sport.

If you prefer to get into the sport on a social level, you can always pick up a complete rig for approximately R20 000. ●

