

Catch me if you can!

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lungani zama

THE 2010 Dusi Canoe Marathon is bracing itself for the tightest of finishes this morning at Blue Lagoon in Durban.

You can forget murmurs of favourites and form, because Andrew Birkett and Jason Graham have swished all that talk aside and kept themselves right in the thick of things with the superstar duo of Ant Stott and Michael Mbanjwa.

This morning, they will leave Inanda Dam as one, and it will be the mother of all tactical battles that decides this year's winner.

The battle for third is just as tight, with the young "Change a Life" crew of Eric Zondi and Thomas Ngidi punching well above their weight on a day that they were expected to struggle on. Piers Cruickshanks and Jacques Theron caught the youngsters, but could not establish a lead that would have been priceless going into today's finale.

"I think that in future Dusi marathons, we will see those two right up there dominating," a clearly impressed Theron said.

"They had a phenomenal day out there, and third place is definitely in the balance now," Cruickshanks added.

But it is another young gun who is grabbing the headlines as we speak. The mental capacity shown by Birkett won praise even from fierce rival Stott, who said that the wiry youngster is definitely a future star. "We were surprised by them on the first day, but that has now turned to being very, very impressed," Stott said after the two boats had entered the Inanda home straight together.

Stott and Mbanjwa had mowed down the one-minute deficit from the first stage within an hour, but they simply could not pull away and create their own lead.

Such was Birkett's determination, that he skipped his final stop for a drink because he didn't want to let Mbanjwa and Stott out of his sight.

He had to endure 45 minutes of paddling across Inanda without liquid, but the upshot of that is a real chance of the title.

"We took a major gamble at the last portage, but we were so close, I knew that if I stopped we would not catch them again," an exhausted Birkett reflected in between massive gulps of hydration. Graham (31) said Birkett had galvanised him with his sheer determination.

"He was a champion out there. A real champion. It's uncanny for someone of that age to have such a strong mindset, and his example has allowed me to finally find something similar from within," Graham enthused.

Despite being expected to drop their relentless gallop from the first day, Graham and Birkett simply refused to give up the ghost, and they now have as good a chance as ever to pull off a sensational upset triumph.

"We are feeling good, and anything can happen on the final day of a Dusi," Graham said.

"Burma will obviously be crucial, and any mistakes at this stage will go a long way to determining a winner."

Stott and Mbanjwa accepted the challenge, and are also steeling themselves for what could be a sprint finish.

Stott revealed that he had slipped at Mngomeni, as they tried to sprint away from their challengers. "My foot got caught on my splash cover, and so we entered the water together when we had hoped to be just ahead.

Mbanjwa, who said they were both feeling better than ever after two stages, could scarcely believe that their rivals had maintained their pace. "We kept on thinking we would get away, but they just stuck onto us. "We will try to get to Burma first, but it is very hard to shake off a boat on flat water," Mbanjwa added. "Maybe we will have to sprint at the end to win it."

After the last two days, a mad dash at the death would be a fitting finale to one of the best Dusi duels ever.

Miedema, Kime lead despite swims: page 62

Men: 1. A Stott/ M Mbanjwa 5hr:28m:18sec.81; 2. A Birkett/ J Graham 5:28:18.98; 3. J Theron/ P Cruickshanks 5:44:49.71; 4. T Ngidi/ E Zondi 5:44:52.92; 5. C Turton/ M Rasmussen 5:51:56.70

Women: 1. A Mediema/ R Kime 6hr:22m:32sec.21; 2. A Adie/ L Harmsen 6:33:55.25; 3. J Hodson/ H Pitchford 6:36:21.18