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Paddlers from the ground-breaking Change A Life Academy in the Valley Of A Thousand Hills are targeting five of the top 10 places in The Unlimited Dusi canoe marathon that starts on 16 February.

The Dusi is one of the largest and toughest canoe marathons in the world, featuring plenty of portaging to go along with the challenges of paddling the 120 kilometres from Pietermaritzburg to Durban.

Multiple Dusi champion Martin Dreyer heads the academy, which teaches children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who live along the Dusi route, about paddling. The development programme headed up by Dreyer helps transition the most promising paddlers from good to elite performers.

Title hopefuls

Spearheaded by the fancied title hopefuls Thulani Mbanjwa and Sibonelo Zondi, both of whom were part of the original core group that started the academy with Dreyer, the flourishing training group is bristling with talented K2 crews positive about their chances of racing into the top 10, and ideally onto the podium.

A careful browse through the academy's impressive list of top achievements and a quick glance at results from recent races around the country leads one to quickly realise just how formidable an outfit the Change A Life 2012 Dusi squad is and the pedigree they bring to this year's spectacle.

"Obviously Bungee (Thulani Mbanjwa) and Sibonelo (Zondi) are the most recognised guys to have come through our academy and we are hoping for great things for them in this year's Dusi, but there are many other really talented guys in our squad as well," said Dreyer, who earned the nickname "The Dusi Duke" for his impressive feats in the Dusi, which included seven victories.

Aiming for top 10

"The Cele brothers (Richard and Nhlanhlayakhe), Thomas Ngidi and John Ncgobo, and Lucas Mthlane and Mmeli Cele will all be hoping for a top 10 finish, whilst it will be very interesting to see just how Nkosi Cele and Skhumbuso Ngidi go.

"Then there's Kwanda Mhlope who, even though he's now part of the new professional team Team Best 4 Kayak Centre and will partner Lance Kime, we still consider as one of our own and are excited about their chances of finishing in the top five," he added.

The group have been hard at work in recent months preparing for the biggest event on the Change A Life calendar and are optimistic that their efforts will be rewarded when all the action gets underway in less than a month's time.

Fantastic shape

"After the KZN river season last year a lot of the guys stayed fit and kept the Change A Life flag flying high by doing some multisport events mid-year, where some of them really did well. Then, once the rivers filled up a bit, the guys have been training really hard and are in fantastic shape at the moment," said Dreyer.

"We know the potential that some of these guys have and, without getting ahead of ourselves before the race has even started, we are definitely very excited for this year's Dusi," he added. "Hopefully now the guys can just go out there and have a really good race."

Under Dreyer's watchful eye several of the Change A Life squad, many of whom are from the Valley of a Thousands Hills – the same valley through which the three day race twists and turns - have made phenomenal progress in recent months and the academy now finds itself on the brink of potentially dominating the top 10 of this year's K2 race.

Anything can happen

The vastly experienced Dreyer knows all too well though that anything can happen on a river and is hesitant to make any predictions ahead of the gruelling three days of racing which lie ahead of his young hopefuls.

"There is definitely a lot of potential in our academy at the moment and we really are hoping to do well at this year's Dusi, but just how things will pan out one can be never be certain," said Dreyer.

"We would absolutely love to have five boats in the top 10, but we're trying not to focus on results too much just yet," he added. "The guys have the potential and have been given the tools, hopefully now they can go out there and drum out the tune."

The Unlimited Dusi canoe marathon from Camps Drift, Pietermaritzburg to Blue Lagoon, Durban takes place on from 16 to 18 February.

SInfo reporter

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