

Paddlers rush to be Dusi ready

SPORTS REPORTER

A RACE of another kind is on ahead of this year's Dusi. After huge water at the recent Drak Challenge, for many paddlers it's now a race against the clock to replace or repair their equipment in time for South Africa's biggest canoe marathon.

Heavy overnight rains the day before the Drak ensured that the event was contested in the highest water levels since its inception in 1994. This caused the organisers to restrict entries to paddlers with an A-plus rating. In fact, only 40 percent of the field made it to the finish, and over the two days of the race it is estimated that one in every three boats was damaged or lost.

This has had a dramatic impact on local canoe suppliers, especially with the Dusi being only weeks away. This year the race will take place from February 14-16.

Owen Hemingway, of Pope's Canoe Centre in Pietermaritzburg, said that many Dusi paddlers were now scrambling to get their boats fixed.

"We're very busy," he said. "There have been a lot of broken boats and many people also lost their boats completely. We're working flat out to meet the demand."

Rick Whitton, the owner of



IN DEMAND: Owen Hemingway, of Pope's Canoe Centre, has been inundated with requests for boat repairs after the carnage at the Drak Challenge. Many paddlers are scrambling to have their boats repaired in time for the Dusi.

PICTURE: GERARD GRIESSÉL

Kayak Centre in Hillcrest, described the situation as "carnage".

"We have been inundated with paddlers wanting their boats fixed in time for the Dusi," he said. "We have had to stop taking on any new business so that we can get the boats that need repairing ready in time. I feel sorry for the guys who lost their boats and now have no canoe for the Dusi."

The big water at the Drak took its toll on top paddlers, too. Cam Schoeman, the 2008 K2 marathon world champion with Ant Stott, was one of those whose race ended early.

"I took a swim quite early, near the start and that was it, game over, my boat was gone," said Schoeman.

Luckily for Schoeman, his boat was found later. "Owen Hemingway phoned me a couple of hours after the race and said he'd seen my boat above Black Murray. It was a couple of kilometres downriver from where I fell out."

London Olympic bronze medal winner Bridgitte Hartley wasn't surprised by the conditions because she hadn't had an opportunity to trip the river before the race, but she was also upended by the tough conditions, and ended up losing her boat.

"I walked about six kilometres looking for my boat," said Hartley.

"Despite finding some other canoes and lots of other equipment, I didn't find mine."