

SA's Ashwell crowned African champ

13 December 2018 – Cape Town sailor Matt Ashwell has returned home victorious after claiming top honours at the African Optimist Championships in Maputo, Mozambique.

The 15-year-old finished second overall at the same championships, held in Angola, in 2016, but this time claimed wins in six of his eight races to



beat Denise Parruque of Mozambique into second spot (and top girl overall), with Mohammed Al Qasmi of Oman finishing in third place.

“The emotions I experienced immediately after winning the last race, and thus winning the championships, were incredible compared to two years ago. This year I shouted with elation and threw my hands in the air, whereas in Angola I merely smiled,” explained the SACS High School student.

“In the months leading up to the regatta I was aiming to achieve gold. This changed once I saw the entry list. The Angolan that won in 2016 was participating, as well as sailors from Oman. Two of the sailors from Oman I had met at World Championships, one of which had finished considerably better than me. My goal then was to get a podium finish. After the first day’s racing in Maputo, my results were great. I then decided finally to try and win the championships.”

That he did in style, finishing well ahead of all his rivals.



“My favourite race was definitely the last one. It was blowing between 18 and 23 knots and it was close from the start. I am quite small compared to a lot of the bigger sailors, and so I had to hike hard throughout the whole race. By the last few hundred metres of the race, my legs were burning, but I knew that this could be the last race that I would ever sail on an Optimist. In the end, I won by a few metres, claiming gold at the African champs,” he explained.

Optimists are generally the boats most youngsters learn to sail on, before they move on to larger things, and Ashwell admits he loves the class.

“I find Optimist sailing extremely fun, because of the amount of friends that you make from all over the world, as well as the freedom it gives you. The amount of Optimists around is very high, creating tough competition



on the water, but also more people to have fun with on land. Everyone who sails Oppies has a like interest, which creates an amazing atmosphere at every regatta. Optimists are in my opinion the best boats to start sailing on.”

Meanwhile, Ashwell’s teammate, Ingrid Holm, finished second overall in the girls’ competition in Maputo, while the SA team took third spot in the team racing behind Mozambique and Angola.

Over 100 of the country’s young sailors will now converge on the Vaal Dam for the National Youth Championships, which run from 15 to 20 December.

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