



Swimming in the Face of Racial Stereotypes

South Africa

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By Rowan Philp

NO black person had ever swum from Robben Island to the mainland until Masimo-a-Badimo Magerman, acting on a bet, tackled the freezing, shark-infested water.

Magerman couldn't even swim properly until early last year. But last month - just 16 months after a power-lunch challenge - the finance company boss, who grew up in Soweto, staggered alone onto Blouberg beach, having swum the 7.5km ocean stretch, protected by nothing but his swimming trunks and a thin film of Vaseline.

Few knew of his attempt and there was no fanfare on his arrival.

When Magerman emerged from the sea, he raised his fist "in private recognition of how Nelson Mandela's sacrifice on that island" had changed his life. He also admitted to a bit of personal satisfaction.

He said: "I mean, some of the guys had said: 'No way a black guy swims that!'".

The 38-year-old had swum roughly the same route once attempted by Xhosa warrior Makana, who drowned in the late 19th century while trying to escape the island prison.

In April this year, four black men from Khayelitsha divided the swim between them in a historic relay effort.

This week, swimming and race relations authorities declared the hope that the achievement of "these ordinary men" would mean the "final death knell for the persistent idea that blacks can't swim".

One of the most stubborn racial stereotypes around the world, it's a notion as widely held among blacks as among whites, according to the SA Institute of Race Relations.

Just two years ago, debate raged in the US about whether it was fair on black participants in the Survivor reality TV series to have to compete with whites in swimming challenges. Some even cited dubious segregation-era "science" reports about genetic differences in bone density and muscle mass.



Frans Cronjé, deputy director of the Institute for Race Relations, said that while fewer black South Africans had been taught to swim, "the idea that one race group is somehow less able to swim is patently nonsense".

Ram Barkai, Magerman's original challenger, and organiser of the annual Cadiz Freedom Swim from Robben Island to Bloubergstrand, said: "The old stereotypes are so inhibiting, so it's brilliant that Masimo will put a dent in the assumptions of people of all colours."

Barkai admitted that he hadn't bargained for Magerman cracking the route within just 16 months, and had to cough up a bottle of Dom Pérignon champagne for losing the wager.

Peter Bales, chairman of the Cape Long Distance Swimming Association, said: "We've had a few coloured swimmers and a few Indian swimmers complete the swim, but Masimo is the first black person to do it. It's quite remarkable, considering he was a poor swimmer to start with."

Magerman completed the swim in two hours and 45 minutes, having paused only once to take fluids from a support boat.

He hired a swimming coach and, on most mornings, woke up at 4.30am to fit in longer and longer sessions in the pool.

At the time of his attempt, his maximum "cold-water training" had been just one kilometre off Clifton Beach, leaving him with "serious doubts" as to whether he would make it.

"I've seen coloured guys training but throughout my own training, I never saw another black guy in the water. It has a lot more to do with socialisation than anything else."

Shaun Adriaanse, chief executive of Swimming South Africa, said less than 2% of South Africa's 10000 registered swimmers were black.

He added that swimming tuition at township schools remained "very low", despite inroads made by a national "Learn to Swim" project.

Adriaanse said of Magerman's feat: "An ordinary black person just deciding to swim the most gruelling event, and doing it - that proves the stereotype completely wrong."