

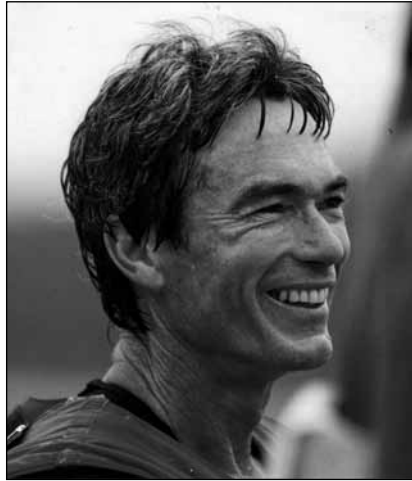
Graeme Pope-Ellis (1948–2010)

Graeme Pope-Ellis, who was a South African sporting legend, passed away in a tragic accident on his farm outside Pietermaritzburg, at the age of 62.

He completed the Dusi canoe marathon – arguably the toughest endurance event in South Africa – 46 consecutive times, most recently in 2010, winning it an incredible 15 times. He also won countless canoe races throughout the country in the veteran, masters and grandmasters age groups since his dominance of the Dusi in the 1970s and 80s.

He made this three-day river race so completely his own that he was hailed ‘the Dusi King’. He was also called ‘the Pope’, which aside from being a reference to his surname was an acknowledgement to his awe-inspiring superiority over lesser mortals when it came to this world-famous river canoe marathon.

‘The Pope’ and ‘The Dusi King’ were two nicknames used so often by the media in headlines that they almost became clichés when reporting on the Dusi canoe marathon, but they are probably the most appropriate way to describe the remarkable influence Graeme Pope-Ellis had on the race.



Graeme Pope-Ellis

His ability to pace himself, make superb tactical decisions literally on the run and judge the ever-changing river conditions had a touch of religion about it. And the way he dominated the event from his first victory in 1972 until his 15th in 1990 meant Pope-Ellis ruled this tough river race in a way most royal figures can only dream about.

Pope-Ellis grew up on a farm in the Bishopstowe area on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg along the Umsunduzi River and was four when he watched

the first Dusi in 1952. From then on his connection to the river was visceral. He paddled his first Dusi in 1965 when he was 17 and a Std 9 pupil at Alexandra High School. He and his school mate Richard Hackland, paddling in a double, won the novice prize.

In 1969 they came second out of 79 teams, one-and-a-half hours behind the winners. In 1970 national service interfered with his training and he finished 17th. He never again allowed anything to get in the way of his training.

For the 1972 race, he and partner Eric Clarke trained five hours a day, two-and-a-half paddling and two-and-a-half running, and won it. In 1981 he was the first person to win the Dusi in a single canoe.

Pope-Ellis was a quiet, modest and private man. For many years his remarkable canoeing achievements brought little publicity – and that was how he preferred it. When fame caught up with him, he didn't like it.

In his early days of canoeing success he did not have the physique one might have expected. After one of his victories, a woman journalist asked a bunch of canoeists which was Pope-Ellis. When they pointed him out she thought they were joking. 'You can't be Pope-Ellis,' she told him. 'You are far too skinny to win a race like this.'

Winning a race like the Dusi canoe marathon over the age of 30 is considered extraordinary. In 1986, when he was 38, 'the Pope' not only won but broke a Dusi record he'd set 10 years earlier.

'How did he do it?' a canoeing partner was asked. Tim Cornish, who won four Dusi titles with Pope-Ellis said: 'He was absolutely meticulous in his preparations. I only had to train

and paddle with him. Tactics, local knowledge and equipment were all taken care of. He was amazing.'

Rick Whitton won the Grand Masters Dusi title in 2008 with Pope-Ellis in a new record time, and cherishes memories of the 'Dusi King' going back to the days he was learning the kayak manufacturing trade with Gordon Rowe in Pinetown in the seventies. It was then that Pope-Ellis spent some time in the factory learning the trade.

'He was so passionate about everything, whether it was his wife and family, his business, his sport or his friends. He was a total inspiration to me, a champion in everything he did, a legend.'

'In all the years I knew Graeme, I never saw him fail to make time for a stranger, a youngster or a novice paddler who wanted to chat to him or ask a question,' said Whitton. Despite his successes, he remained humble and his generosity of spirit saw him take countless youngsters under his wing, often hosting them at his home and taking them on training and tripping sessions on the river to teach them the intricacies of the Dusi.

One of those who learnt from the 'Dusi King' was the man who has won many Dusi titles and become known as 'The Dusi Duke', Martin Dreyer. 'Graeme was everything I ever want to be, as an athlete, a devoted husband to Wendy and father to Lee, and just as a human being,' said Dreyer. 'When I arrived on the Dusi canoe scene in 1998 from the Cape, with serious plans to get into the top 10, no-one really wanted to help because I was a threat. But not Graeme. He took me into his home for months and showed me everything he knew about the race.'

Obituaries

‘I couldn’t believe it,’ recalls Dreyer. ‘There I was, a kid, reading the ‘Pope’s’ autobiography in total awe, and he was taking me into his home and teaching me everything he knew.’

‘I had a deal with Graeme, which sadly I am not going to be able to honour,’ added Dreyer. ‘I promised that I would do the Dusi with him when he was 70. But the Dusi will always be about Graeme Pope-Ellis. Forever. There is no need to try and manufacture any other tribute to him,’ Dreyer said.

Current Olympian and former winner of the Dusi junior title, Shaun Rubenstein, who first met Pope-Ellis as a wide-eyed five-year-old, was another whose life the ‘Dusi King’ helped shape.

‘I was the proudest guy in the world when I used to be taken to my judo competitions by the ‘Dusi King’,’ recalls Rubenstein. ‘It was when I decided to give the Dusi a shot at 15 that he really took me under his wing and taught me so much.’

‘Graeme and his wife Wendy

were like parents to me,’ Rubenstein continued. ‘They opened their home and their hearts to me. When I won the World Marathon Championships, the first person I phoned from France after my parents was Graeme Pope-Ellis.’

‘Graeme made me who I am today as a paddler. He taught me the work ethic I follow today and, even though he wasn’t a sprinter, he took such a keen, enthusiastic interest in my career.’

‘I can still hear that croak in his voice when I phoned him to tell him that I had qualified for the Olympics.’

‘Graeme taught me to get out of bed with a smile on my face, every day,’ said Rubenstein. ‘He had such passion for life and it rubbed off on everyone around him.’

The passing of Graeme Pope-Ellis has left a huge hole in the South African paddling community. After running a successful boat-building business in Pietermaritzburg for many years, he became a full-time farmer. He is survived by his wife Wendy and son Lee.

STEVE CAMP