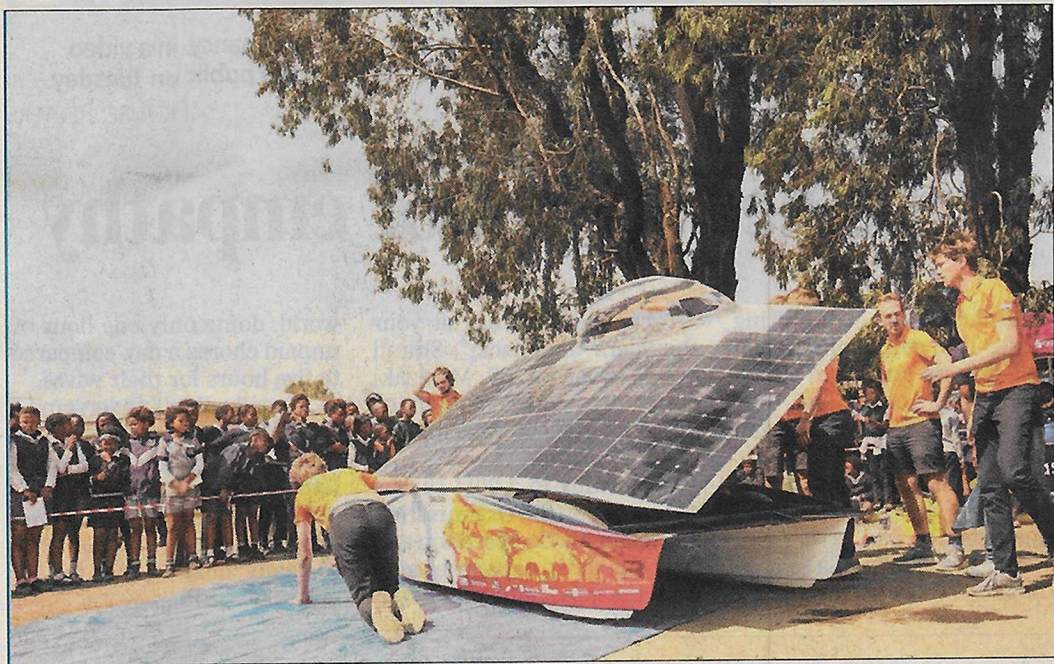




AVE: 44284.85 (ZAR)



Team North West University's Solar Car Sirius X25 in the seventh stage of the Sasol Solar Challenge race between Sedgefield and Swellendam.

Drivers require tenacity for the solar challenge long haul

GABI FALANGA
gabi.falanga@inl.co.za

NERVES of steel, intense concentration and the ability to cope in extreme heat are just some of the qualities it takes to be a solar car driver. Eleven local and international teams have been driving across the country in solar cars during the Sasol Solar Challenge, in an attempt to accumulate the most distance possible while adhering to speed limits. The teams left Pretoria last Saturday and are due to arrive

in Cape Town this afternoon for the competition's finish. Professor Albert Helberg, a strategist for North-West University's solar team, said you either had the ability to be a solar-car driver or not. "If they get out (of the car) and they're white in the face and jittery, then they're not a solar car driver. They must like driving a solar car," he said. He added that solar car drivers needed to be able to concentrate very well for long stretches. Sasol Solar Challenge event director Winstone Jordaan

said: "What you look for in a driver is someone who can follow instructions very carefully and who's extremely sensitive to that, to keep the speed the same, to make small changes." The drivers must weigh a maximum of 80kg. "If the driver weighs only 65kg, they must carry 15kg with them." Sarah Bennink Bolt of The Netherlands' Nuon solar team added that the person had to be a good driver. "It's very difficult to drive a solar car." She explained that the cars that Nuon made were built around the driver.



Solar car drivers need specific skills to navigate these vehicles. They have to be of a certain weight and build and have the strength and the mental endurance to complete long distances like the Sasol Solar Challenge. It is not a comfortable ride. PICTURES: BARRY ALDWORTH/EXPECT LIFE

"So the smaller the driver is, the less space the driver takes up and the smaller we can make the cars. "Our drivers are very alike: They have the same shoulder and hip width, the same height, in the same proportions."

The drivers had to undergo training and practise, logging a certain number of hours before being allowed to compete. "It's very hot and not very comfortable. It's very scary, like when you overtake a truck. The freeway in Joburg was

scary," she said. Helberg said when choosing drivers for the NWU team, they first let them drive the car slowly on campus to get used to it before driving faster at a test site. New drivers would then

slowly be allowed to drive during the easier sections of races until they felt comfortable and gained enough experience to take on the difficult sections. "They must be able to make independent decisions on how safe they feel in the car and

not wait for me to give instructions. They also need to be able to control their inclination to drive under pressure with safety," Bennink Bolt explained that during competitions, the driver's only function was to rest and drive.