

A rallying sister team

Meet the only all-woman rally team in Africa who recently joined the most competitive class on the South African rally scene – the S200

By Morné Condon

While Lola and Megan Verlaque might not be household names – yet – they are fast becoming both well-known and popular, locally and throughout Africa. The Verlaques are affectionately known as the “Rally Chicks”, those intrepid young rally competitors who, until last season, campaigned in the N4 class behind the wheel of a turbo-charged four-wheel drive entry.

For 2009 this driver and navigator pair moved to racing in a Volkswagen Polo,

competing in the naturally-aspirated four-wheel drive Super 2000 (S2000) class, by far the most competitive class on the South African rally scene. It is soon to become the absolute pinnacle of international rallying when the World Rally Championship (WRC) adopts the S2000 as the de facto standard for top-class competition.

TWO-OF-A-KIND

Lola (34) and Megan (24) are the only all-woman rally team in South Africa and the

only such team in Africa and have established themselves as worthy opponents. The sisters have been rallying together since 2002, when they took over their father’s rally car that he drove in the African Rally Championship (ARC).

Since then they have competed together in both regional and national championship events in South Africa as well as in the FIA ARC, where they most recently took part in the Safari Rally in Kenya in April. Over the years they have earned a reputation for

From left: Sister rally team Lola and Megan Verlaque at the Total Tour Natal Rally held in KwaZulu-Natal early this year



determination and consistency and established themselves as top-10 finishers in the national championship.

OFF THE RACETRACK

Lola and Megan live in Johannesburg, where Lola works with her father in the family plant hire business. Megan has a Bachelor of Commerce in marketing and is a qualified beautician and hairdresser. Most recently Megan is farming butternut in the current growing season and has also just started with some livestock farming.

On the rare occasions that there is any off-time – when not tackling rally stages around Africa – the Verlaques enjoy spending time at their game farm and at the local fishing hole.

FAMILY DYNAMIC

When siblings share a confined space for any length of time, things can get interesting. Add the pressure cooker environment of competition and it is likely to boil over. For Lola and Megan it is no different.

“We do fight, there are times we really fight like normal sisters,” says Lola. “Because you are family, you make friends again much quicker though. Megan likes me to drive my best, she knows what I’m capable of and gets upset if I don’t do my best behind the wheel. We actually have a very good relationship, we’re very close.”

In fact it is their father, Eddie, who is largely responsible for causing the rally bug to bite in the first place. A Christmas bet with friends saw the family packed off to see their dad compete in an ARC event and the bug bit. Now Eddie manages the team. Their mom, Carol, goes with to the events where she takes responsibility for feeding, watering and looking after everyone to make sure they are in the right place and also washes the windscreen when there’s time.

RALLYING AROUND AFRICA

The first opportunity for the sisters to try their hand behind the wheel of the new car was at the first round of the ARC in Tanzania where they produced an excellent fourth place. “The Africa Rally Championship is a lot longer than those which take place in South Africa,” says Lola. “There is more



The sisters cut their teeth in the top S2000 rally class at one of their first competitive events in their ex-factory Volkswagen Polo

endurance required and you have to work on preserving the car to complete the event. It is very challenging.”

The foray into Africa to compete in the Kenyan event saw the Verlaque sisters amongst the racers on the start line for the 57th running of this event which was previously a round of the World Rally Championship (WRC) from 1973 to 2002. It was also the second round of the FIA ARC season for 2009 and the Verlaques were the only South African team to compete in the event this year.

POWER SHIFT

The sisters found some marked differences between their new S2000 Polo and the previous turbocharged four-wheel drive car. “The Polo is good and Megan and I had a lot of fun,” says Lola of their shift to the new class. “It is very different to drive compared to the Subaru and Mitsubishi.”

Since the S2000 class does not make use of a turbocharger, rally drivers need to stay far higher in the rev range to keep making power – this in stark contrast to the turbocharged cars where the power band is much lower.

On their latest performance in the Safari Rally, Lola showed far more confidence behind the wheel of the Polo. “I drove better than I did in the Total Tour Natal Rally in KwaZulu-Natal, which was only our second event in the new car after the Rally of Tanzania in February,” says Lola. “I’m getting on top of the car and learning how to make it do what I want it to do! We’re getting there.”

The Verlaques have also enjoyed enormous support from Volkswagen South Africa since

acquiring the ex-factory Polo. “Volkswagen Motorsport has been incredibly helpful in giving us valuable technical assistance and advice,” says Lola.

NAVIGATING SUCCESS

Just getting to the events from South Africa is an epic adventure in its own right. For the Tanzania event Megan and her father set off from their Johannesburg home on a four-day road trip to make the start. Their rally car was towed behind them and Lola flew in later to join them at the start in the port city of Dar es Salaam (Haven of Peace).

Their enthusiasm and dedication to the sport is unsurpassed and is admired by their fellow competitors. Lola and her mother trail the rally car behind a panel van from Johannesburg to ARC events in Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe – sometimes a journey of 5 000 kilometres just to get to the start. Then there’s the ‘recce’, followed by a 320-plus kilometres rally over three days and then back to South Africa for the next national event.

Costs for the Rally Chicks also play a significant factor this season as they no longer have a sponsor and are funding their rally efforts privately. This does little to dampen their enthusiasm for the sport though – and they have some very specific goals. For Lola the dream is to compete in a World Rally Championship (WRC) event in the S2000 class while Megan has shifted to the driver’s seat. For regional events Megan competes as a driver while she revels in her role as navigator for her sister in the bigger rallies. 