

Dear Ballito Pro: this is how NOT to handle a PR disaster

By  Shelley Finch

29 Jun 2018

It happened in slow motion. Like a train heading for a car stuck on the railway line. You know what is about to happen but you're hoping that someone stops it in time.



Meet your 2018 Billabong Junior Series Ballito Pro Junior winners, Rio Waida (Indonesia) and Zoe Steyn (East London, SA) who claimed their victory today in medium sized onshore conditions at Willard Beach, Ballito.

#BillabongJNR #TheBallitoPro

👍 556 💬 2.8K ➡ 6.8K

The post began to pick up momentum in the late evening of 26 June. It had already garnered a thousand or so shares and comments, but a representative of the Ballito Pro and its sponsors were yet to make any sort of formal statement. Ballito Pro competitor Zoe Steyn had received exactly half the prize money received by her male counterpart and South Africa isn't impressed.

Then came the excuses. Anyone with any common sense could see this wasn't going to end well for the organisers or any of the associated sponsors.

"The World Surf League is the governing and sanctioning body of the event that determine all prize money and rankings.

We have brought this to their attention for further comment,” they said. A full two days after the image had begun receiving the first negative feedback.

What the fail!? Not only did it take the organisers two full days to address what was clearly a rather impassioned social media outcry, but their first response was not “hey folks, we totally hear what you’re saying and this isn’t cool. Give us some time to figure out how to fix this.” Their first response was ‘actually its someone else’s fault’.

We’ve heard it a lot recently: “a junior staff member” or “this is not what our business believes in” (but it happened anyway).

A little less conversation, a little more action please

It is time that brands start understanding that excuses and throwing other people under the bus to cover up their own negligence or bad corporate culture is not going to cut it with consumers anymore. They want to see action. They want to see you do something instead of hearing your carefully crafted lip service.

The Ballito Pro and its sponsors could have stopped this runaway train by simply saying: “we hear you. It’s 2018 and this is not cool. We are going to take this up with the World Surf League as a matter of urgency, but in the meantime, as a gesture of goodwill and a demonstration of our commitment to equal pay, we are going to top Zoe’s prize money up to the R8000.00 she deserves.” Easy.

If that was going to cause problems with the World Surf League, they could have given her R4000.00 a voucher to buy some surf kit or a few thousand cases of Bos Ice Tea. But no. They gave her niks. Nada. Nothing. Which means that despite your nicely crafted media statement, Zoe is still R4000 down on her male counterpart. And that is what matters to the people currently lambasting you across social media.

What a complete failure to read the crowd.

It is also worthwhile to note that it probably cost someone a lot more than R4000.00 to have their latest carefully crafted statement written. Never mind, the cost of the meetings and phone calls that must be flying around between all the role players at the moment. Oh, the irony.

Wait, it’s 2018 isn’t it?

Another, and probably far more important, conversation that this has started is “how did this happen in the first place?” It is an example of how deep gender disparity and sexism is entrenched in sports, in marketing, in society itself. It is so normalised that we don’t even notice it when it is right in front of our faces. We have apparently come so far. It appears not.

Zoe Steyn is not yet 18, but as a young woman, she has already received the message loud and clear that no matter how you much excel, you will always be worth less than a man. She has been told that by a brand who is supposedly “committed to gender equality” and who “will continue to support the growth and progression of women’s surfing in South Africa.”

Marketers and PR practitioners beware. The message from your customers is loud and clear: no one wants to hear your excuses. We want to know what you’re going to do to change it.

Update: Since the writing of this article, Bos Iced Tea has stepped up to award Zoe an additional R4,000. While the move did come later than it should have, it is good to see that at least one of the brands sponsoring the Ballito Pro actually listened to what the public was asking for. They have not only taken decisive action in relation to the immediate issue at hand, but they have also committed to policy changes and continuing the conversation around gender equality. You can read their full statement [here](#).

ABOUT SHELLEY FINCH

Shelley Finch is the founder of Handcrafted Brands, a creative and digital marketing agency that specialises in working with socially and environmentally conscious brands.

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