

'I expect to make the final'

Eastern Cape-born Roto looks to become SA's newest star at world championships

David Isaacson

SOUTH African track ace Thando Roto, who originally hails from the Eastern Cape after having grown up in Dimbaza township near King William's Town, is planning to spring a few surprises at the World Athletics Championships in London.

Usain Bolt and Justin Gatlin head into the world championships in London this week sharing identical 100m season's bests of 9.95sec with one other athlete – Roto.

Tuks student Roto said he was looking to pull off a surprise or two in this event.

Roto, who flew out with the SA-based members of the team last night, is scheduled to line up in the 100m heats in the opening session of the showpiece on Friday night (9.20pm SA time).

And he is planning to stick around for the semifinals and final, both scheduled for Saturday.

"I'm expecting to make the final," Roto, 21, said.

When fellow South African Akani Simbine flew into the top eight of the 100m at the Rio Games last year, he became the first South African to grace an Olympic final in 84 years.

No South African has reached the 100m final at a world championships to date – imagine Roto and Simbine settling into the blocks at 10.45pm on Saturday.

Wayde van Niekerk is not in this battle, concentrating instead on his 400m-200m double mission.

Roto set his 9.95 personal best at the Gau-

teng North championships in March, finishing second behind Simbine, who went 9.92.

Roto, who lost the better part of 2015 and 2016 to hamstring injuries, has been in the wings since the early days of SA's sprint revolution, finishing sixth in the 2014 national championships, when Simon Magakwe went 9.98 to become the first local flyer to break 10.

Now he is the third-fastest of all time.

Roto grew up not far from Phakamisa township, the home of Anaso Jobodwana, the 200m bronze medallist at the 2015 world championships.

Roto started out playing soccer, rugby and cricket on the streets with the neighbourhood kids, sometimes with mouthwatering stakes.

"We made small bets," Roto said.

"Like for a packet of chips. Both teams would buy the packet and then we'd play.

"The winners would take the packet and go eat it."

It was only in high school in Limpopo, after his mother had relocated to Pretoria, that he discovered his talent for speed.

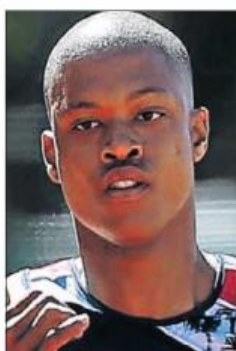
Off his own bat, he applied to get into the Tuks high school and won a spot. The rest is history.

So how does he feel about facing legends like Bolt and Gatlin as well as the younger guns like Andre De Grasse and Yohan Blake.

"Racing those guys doesn't worry me.

"I've raced Akani and Wayde and they're up there with them."

● Wayde could steal some of Bolt's light – Page 13



THANDO ROTO

