

Cornelius recalls the day a tall athlete approached him with a smile on his face ...

Ockert de Villiers

JOHANNESBURG: Cata-putting himself into the air moving at full tilt, Luvo Manyonga used to close his eyes out of fear of the landing.

Manyonga has since his first sessions with coach Neil Cornelius in 2015 overcome his fears, soaring to Olympic long-jump silver medal and the

South African and continental record with eyes wide open.

"To be honest, Luvo was a little bit scared when he first started with me, he would jump in the air with his eyes closed and he told me 'coach, I'm afraid of heights'," Cornelius recalls.

"I told him he had to get over that fear, you have a choice, can you be scared of heights or

how far you can jump.

"He started jumping with his eyes open and he started coming right, we had to teach Luvo how to do things right."

With only four years separating athlete and coach the cynics have always questioned Cornelius' ability to mould an athlete like Manyonga.

Ever since Manyonga registered on his radar as a youth

athlete, Cornelius salivated at the prospect of coaching him.

"When Luvo was 17-years-old I heard this story about this youth boy that could jump 7.50m, the next year he jumped against one of my athletes, Boipelo 'Bips' Motlathhego in the triple jump," Cornelius said.

"I will never forget it, he was competing at the 2009

South African Junior Championships at this track, without any technique he jumped a 15.35m but Bips would go on to win it."

The following year Manyonga would twice leap over eight metres and claim the World Junior long-jump title.

Five years later their paths crossed again when the SA Sports Confederation and

Olympic Committee were scouting for candidates to mentor Manyonga.

"This one day I was busy with my athletes and I see this tall guy walking towards me, and I could see its Luvo smiling saying 'coach, I need help, can you coach me?'"

"And that was the start of it all but he needed help at the beginning, two years of doing

very little training he did not have the right base."

Since joining Cornelius at the University of Pretoria track, Manyonga has become an inspirational figure in the group.

"He is very trustworthy when it comes to other people, the athletes look up to him, they idolise him, he is a good example, he is friendly and he

is humble," said Cornelius.

"He fulfils the role of a brother to the other athletes where he motivates them.

"If you look at the national championships when he made his winning jump before getting injured, he didn't leave, he stayed to support the other athletes and get the crowd behind them."

