



SA youth are on top of the world

Twelve-strong athletics team brings home 11 medals

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● South Africa will forever rule as world athletics champions at under-18 level.

That's the result of three factors coming together at the same time.

Firstly, a small South African contingent of nine boys and three girls topped the medals table in Nairobi a week ago with five gold, three silver and three bronze.

They were aided by the absence of a few top teams, notably the US and Britain, although it was still no mean feat outperforming nations like China and Cuba at the world under-18 championships.

And lastly, the sport's world governing body, the IAAF, is culling this age-group competition. Kenya was its swansong.

South Africa gets to walk off with the prize.

The fact is that the rate at which under-18 stars have reached senior podiums has been pretty poor globally – at well less than 50% – but it's been especially bad for South Africa.

Of all the South African athletes who won the country's 26 under-18 world championship medals from 1999 to 2009, only high jumper Jacques Freitag achieved podium success at senior level – a conversion rate of 3.8%.

It's hard to imagine the current crop fading into obscurity, especially considering how the standard of coaching in South Africa has improved, not to mention the profile of track and field stars from this country, especially in the sprints.

Sokwakhana Zazini was the runaway winner in the boys' 400m hurdles, but it's worth remembering his 46.20sec best in the flat 400m would have been good enough for gold in Nairobi.

That's a little quicker than Wayde van Niekerk managed in his 400m debut at the age of 19 in 2012.

Zazini and Tshenolo Lema, the 100m champion who finished second in the 200m



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Zeny van der Walt snatched a gold medal in the 400m hurdles

behind compatriot Retshidisitswe Mlenga, are both at the Tuks high school, which was set up with the intention of producing Olympic champions.

The two also participated in the mixed 4x400m relay, which won bronze.

But what should worry South Africa's administrators is the 1:3 female-to-male ratio of the team, which is slightly higher than the 1:4 ratio of the senior world championship team going to London next month.

Of the 10 individual medals won in Nairobi, Zeny van der Walt was the only girl to get in on the action, snatching gold in the 400m hurdles after the leader, Sanique Walker of Jamaica, had hit the final barrier.

The 400m hurdles seems to be South Africa's strongest girls event at the moment.

Gontse Morake, ranked fourth in the

world, was part of the mixed relay.

Another two, Juli Veruciel and Rogail Joseph, are ranked inside the top 10, but there was no space for them in this team.

Their world-class performances in early April also meant they were too late to be selected for South Africa's Commonwealth Youth Games team that is competing in the Bahamas at the moment.

They are sitting at home, hardly the best solution for filling the gender gap.

Local administrators need to create a system that is geared towards rewarding athletes and keeping them motivated.

There's no guarantee SA's under-18 stars will shine in the future, but what they did in Kenya will burn on for eternity.

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