



SPORTS

THE BIG READ | WRITTEN BY SIMNIKIWE XABANISA

# SA SPRINTERS ARE GIVING THE JAMAICANS A RUN FOR THEIR MONEY

SOUTH AFRICA IS NOT FAR FROM RIVALLING WHAT  
THE JAMAICANS AND AMERICANS HAVE BEEN  
DOING FOR YEARS

**A**fter years of churning out self-respecting distance and middle-distance runners, 400m hurdlers and the odd world beaters in field events, South Africa has suddenly become a sprinting powerhouse.

Since 2015, when Wayde van Niekerk won 400m gold and Anaso Jobodwana 200m bronze at the Beijing World Championships, South African sprinting has steadily built up the kind of momentum which has seen them not only mimic the Americans' strut, but also run the same times.

In that time, Van Niekerk has broken Michael Johnson's 400m world record; Akani Simbine – the first South African to make an Olympic final since readmission – has set the SA 100m at a world elite 9,89 seconds and dipped under 20 seconds (19,95) for the 200m; 110m hurdler Antonio Alkana has set a new SA record of 13,11 seconds; 400m hurdler Sokwakhana Zazini [16] has set a junior world record of 48,84 seconds; and junior sprinters Gift Leotlela (18) and Clarence Munyai (19) set new SA junior records in the 100m and 200m respectively (10,12 and 20,10 seconds).

To gain a sense of how strong SA sprinting has become over the past three years, consider that #FillUpPotch – which was a marketing ploy on Twitter by the sprinters to fill up Potchefstroom, the venue for this year's national championships – filled the place to the rafters because four of the athletes who made the 100m final had all run under 10 seconds before.

As former SA sprinter Mathew Quinn, who at his best ran 10,08 seconds, said of Simbine, Van Niekerk, Thando Roto and

Henricho Bruintjies ahead of that meet: "When I ran, running a sub-10 was tough. Now if you don't do it, you're no-one."

"What [Usain] Bolt did for world athletics Wayde, Akani and Anaso have done for South African sprinting."

But just how did a country used to doling out puny distance runners suddenly produce preening peacock sprinters by the numbers? The general consensus by the coaches is that a whole host of factors contributed.

Hennie Kriel, who coaches Leotlela, Munyai and Zazini out of the Tuks Sports School, locates the beginning in 2014, when Simon Magakwe became the first South African to dip under 10 seconds for the 100m.

"There's probably more than one reason, it's a collection of things," he explains. "The potential has always been there but once Magakwe became the first South African to do a sub-10 it shook us and showed us what is possible. It's not just the one thing but once it happened, barriers were broken."

It's an assertion supported by Werner Prinsloo, Simbine's coach: "We get asked this a lot, and I keep thinking about if I can come up with a one-liner to answer it. But I can't because it's so many things. It's not as if we came together and said: 'This is what we're going to do.'"

"It's a case of being in the right place at the right time. But you could say guys like Anaso and Wayde started it all, kept building and then it had a snowball effect. Guys out there were looking at these performances and felt they, too, had to be serious about their sprinting."

An undeniable part of the answer is that the coaches have upped their game. Kriel's example is a case in point of how seriously the coaches take their work at Tuks.



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"I made a decision to quit my corporate job two to three years ago to coach full-time at the highest level," said the former Blue Bulls conditioning coach. "My question was why I expected athletes to be professionals if I was a part-time coach."

Prinsloo says Simbine had driven him to ask questions of how much more he could do: "I'd already made it a point to stay with sprints when I started coaching, but the better Akani's performances got the more it forced me to dig deep and work harder as a coach. The result is I got knowledge and experience of how to do it, and he didn't need to go to the USA to be a better sprinter."

A sign of the high esteem in which SA coaches are held internationally is what Glen Mills, the coach who gave us Bolt, has to say about Van Niekerk's coach Ans Botha, who is 75, originates from sleepy Namibia and is based in equally sleepy Bloemfontein, but is at the cutting edge of sprint coaching.

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"Ans is learned in sprints training, which I learnt from our numerous discussions on training philosophy and technique," said Mills by email late last year. "I have witnessed her in action here in Jamaica and in Rio and I am greatly impressed with her training programmes and methodology, which is a clear indication why Wayde is so superlative in his performances."

Sports scientist Ross Tucker reckons the high-performance environment at Tuks is partly responsible for the sprinters coming through the system: "Maybe Tuks is succeeding because they've managed to attract good athletes after someone from there made it."

"They also train around each other, so they've got a team environment in an individual

sport. If ever you wanted to build a high-performance centre, what they're doing at Tuks is how you'd go about it - they're incentivised, work off one another, they've got belief and good systems behind them."



Anaso Jobodwana (right)

GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES/STOCK PHOTO/ALAMY





Antonio Alkana

An almost secret weapon-like aspect of the good systems behind the athletes has been the work done by the little-known Dr Helen Bayne, a Johannesburg-born biomechanist who got her PhD in her field at the University of Western Australia in Perth.

The best way to illustrate what Bayne does is to recount what she has done for Simbine's performances: "The work we did on Akani's starts is a prime example of what we do. In 2014 and 2015 his starts were weak while his finishes were strong, so that's where he was losing his races.

"The key thing in the acceleration in the start is how the athlete applies force to the ground. You want to apply force in the right direction and with Akani, we were finding that the force was not directed optimally.

"We were able to measure that force, combine it with slow motion footage and what the coach was seeing from his eye. After that the coach could work on what his observations were and make changes based on the footage and the numbers we had from the research.

"Initially the process took place over time, as we got to fine-tune what we tested, how we tested it and how the coaches implemented it."

The Tuks Sports School, which is charged with admitting talented sports

kids from all codes, but is critical to keeping the sprinting conveyor belt turning, is another interesting side story which has been influential in producing Leotlela, Munya and Zazini.

The school has an intensely private mystery benefactor understood to be a former athlete now based in the USA, who invested millions in it so that it could give scholarships and bursaries to talented young sports people from around the country.

Its head athletics coach is Kriel...

## RECENT SIGNIFICANT PERFORMANCES BY SA ATHLETES

**Simbine** (100m PB of 9,89 seconds and 200m PB of 19,95 seconds) comfortably beat former world champion Justin Gatlin, Olympic 100m bronze medallist and 200m silver medallist Andre de Grasse, former world record holder Asafa Powell and former world champion Kim Collins in the Doha leg of the Diamond League in May, the first SA athlete to win the 100m at Diamond League level.

**Wayde van Niekerk**, who will attempt to win gold at both the 200m and 400m at the London World Championships this month, has improved his 200m best from 19,94 seconds to 19,84 seconds, a new SA record which edged out Anaso Jobodwana's 19,87sec from the Beijing world champs. Van Niekerk is also the world record-holder at the 400m, breaking Michael Johnson's 17-year-old record with a time of 43,03 seconds.

High hurdler **Antonio Alkana** broke the SA 110m record in June, setting a new time of 13,11 seconds.

Little-known **Thando Roto** announced himself to South African sprint fans with a time of 9,95 seconds, the second-fastest man ever to run the 100m in SA earlier this year. Roto, from Dimbaza, outside King William's Town, said he was inspired by Jobodwana and actually didn't have a professional running contract when he broke 10 seconds.

Sixteen-year-old **Sokwakhana Zazini**, from Burgersdorp in the Eastern Cape, confirmed his coach Hennie Kriel's claims that he is a gifted hurdler by breaking the under-18 world record for the 400m hurdles to a new time of 48,84 seconds.

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