

GOLDEN

SOUTH AFRICA HAD A HANDFUL OF REASONS TO CELEBRATE AT THE WORLD U18 ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS.
 BY REGGIE HUFKIE

FIVE

South Africa's stars of the future topped the medals table in Nairobi, Kenya, collecting 11 medals (five gold, three silver and three bronze) and becoming the first SA athletics team to 'win' a World Championships.

In the buildup to Nairobi, the world rankings were in favour of the green-and-gold outfit, with some of the world's leading nations staying home due to security issues.

But after Tshenolo Lemaou, Retshidisitswe Mlenga, Zeney van der Walt, Sokwakhana Zazini and Breyton Poole grabbed gold medals, the world had no option but to turn its focus on the Rainbow Nation.

Team SA magazine caught up with the five medallists ...

TSHENOLO LEMAO (100m)

After losing out on the national U18 100m title in April, Bloemfontein-born Lemaou had his eyes set on two things: the 100m and 200m world U18 titles.

'Not winning a national title gave me more motivation going into the world champs. I remember how fast my heart was beating heading into the heats, but that's when I told myself to calm down. I hadn't had a lot of races building up to the champs, so I was a bit rusty, but I eased off in the last 20m and clocked 10.54sec, winning my heat.'

But when Jamaican favourite Tyreke Wilson was drawn in his semi-final, his approach changed. 'I was way more nervous and after a slow start the whole group was ahead, but that happens, so I came from behind to catch the Jamaican and run 10.50.'

Rain poured down at the Kasarani Stadium for the final.

'I was stressed heading into the final, but I remember listening to Chance The Rapper's mix tape *Coloring Book* and the music made it easier to focus. When the gun went, I was out of the blocks fast and when I came out of my driving phase at 40m, I told myself I had this because the last 40m is my strongest, so I stuck to the race plan

ROGER SEDRES/IMAGESA





RETSHIDISITWE MLENGA (200m)

His soft-spoken manner and long-distance running physique may not point to a talented sprinter, but don't be fooled by his looks - Mlenga is fast. Very fast!

Ranked world No 1 in the 200m heading into the champs, he felt rather rusty. 'I didn't have the energy to warm up for the final, but then I asked myself, "Why am I here?" I also remembered my goal of inspiring young people who are looking for a role model, so I asked God to give me, and everyone competing, strength.'

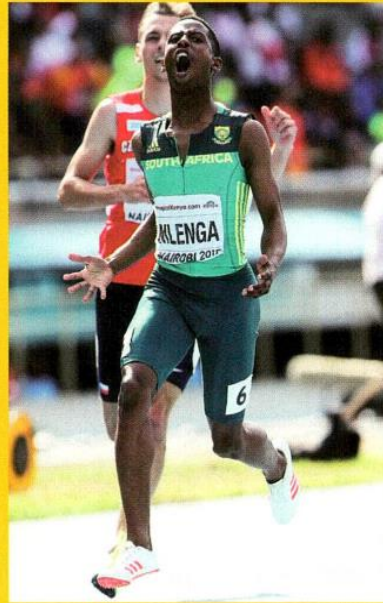
Mlenga ran the race of his life to be crowned world champion. His season's best 21.03sec effort was enough to secure the victory ahead of countryman Lemao.

'The moment I saw I was alone over the line in first place I jumped around and then went down on my knees and thanked God. I love how the Kenyans came out to support us. Even though we aren't from Kenya, they came to support us because we are from Africa.'

A young man already showcasing confidence of this nature should be cherished. Wrap him up, South Africa, and make sure he's well taken care of.

Working under the watchful eye of coach Reneilwe Aphane at Prestige College in Hammanskraal, north of Pretoria, his next goal is to be included in the team to Finland next year.

'People don't know I want to see myself in the history books, for God says: "For I know the thoughts that I think towards you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not evil, to give you an expected end. Jeremiah 29:11."



and when I crossed the line first, I was overwhelmed by excitement and joy.'

A few days later, the TuksSport High School athlete took silver in the 200m and that evening in Nairobi remains one of his highlights.

'People were so welcoming to us in Nairobi. The stadium was filled with a cheering crowd, which was a first for me. The atmosphere was electric,' added Lemao, who has his sights set on the IAAF U20 World Championship in Finland next year. 'The plan is to be in that team, and I just want to keep on improving my personal best times.'

With the limelight dimmed for next year, the young man enjoyed some well-deserved rest - watching his favourite Marvel movies and playing *Fifa* or *NBA* - while playing catch-up on his Grade 11 school work.

ZENEY VAN DER WALT (400m HURDLES)

It took her 58.23sec to win the title, but it was three years of hard work, commitment and perseverance which finally paid dividends.

'Ek sien haar wen' ('I see her win') reads the motto of Afrikaanse Hoër Meisieskool, perhaps the reason winning is engrained in the DNA of this Grade 11 scholar.

'I couldn't believe I was actually there and running for my beautiful country. From the start I gave it my

all and ran my heart out,' Van der Walt recalls. Jamaica's race favourite, Sanique Walker, went out guns blazing in the first part of the final, but Van der Walt remained relaxed and ran according to her own stride.

'Coming into the home straight at the 100m mark I saw I was in second position and that's when I told myself I must give it everything. After the last hurdle I saw there was a chance for gold, and with 110% determination I closed that gap and crossed the line. We still waited to see the photo finish, and the result was gold for South Africa!'



Celebrations were in order and Kenya did not disappoint. 'The food and accommodation in Nairobi was amazing! The people were friendly and kind and always offered a hand if you needed help. Kenya is a country I'd like to visit again.'

Like her U18 teammates, Van der Walt has her eyes set on a medal at next year's U20 World Championships, while a spot in the 2020 Tokyo Olympic team would be another big tick on her to-do list.

SOKWAKHANA ZAZINI (400m HURDLES)

He had to swap his beloved soccer togs for spikes, a move that paid dividends sooner than expected. Born in the Eastern Cape - like speedsters Anaso Jobodwana and Thando Roto - Zazini is the latest sprinting sensation to dominate his event.

'Everyone was expecting me to win. The day before the race, people were all over me and I started feeling the pressure, but at least I learned how to handle pressure.'

With the world best of 48.84sec to his name, Zazini was the pre-race favourite. But that didn't bother him.

'I listened to Future (award-winning hip-hop artist) so I could get hyped up and then it was time for the job,' mentions the TuksSport High School athlete. 'The crowd was packed in,



so I felt even more motivated. After settling into the blocks, the gun went and I had a good start. And I thought, "If they don't catch me before 200m, they must forget it."

A small mistake almost brought his race to a halt, but he soon gathered himself.

'I switched legs on the wrong hurdle. I was supposed to switch on hurdle six, but I switched on hurdle seven. But I fixed that and then I stumbled a bit by the ninth hurdle as I tried chasing time. I didn't run the time I wanted to run.'

KNOWING NAIROBI

Nairobi was founded in 1899 as a rail depot. Nicknamed the 'City in the Sun', it is situated at an altitude of 1 680m above sea level and is the main administrative centre for the national government. Surprisingly, for a country which produces so many star athletes, soccer is the most popular sport in Kenya.

FINAL MEDALS TABLE (top five)

	GOLD	SILVER	BRONZE	TOTAL
South Africa	5	3	3	11
China	5	2	4	11
Cuba	5	2	1	8
Kenya	4	7	4	15
Ethiopia	4	3	5	12

He still crossed the line in 49.27, the third fastest time in the history of the championships, well clear of Moitalel Naadokila of Kenya, who took the silver in 52.06.

Looking to the future, he will be a force to be reckoned with on the senior athletics scene, but he has his eyes set on the experience.

'My short-term goal is to win the U20 champs with a quick time and then my long-term goal is to be included in ASA's team to the World Championships in 2018.'

BREYTON POOLE (HIGH JUMP)

With his eyes set on clearing the bar at 2.30m - a medal-winning height at the 2017 World Championships - Poole's 2.24m gold medal jump

in Nairobi was the perfect stepping stone.

'The 2.24m was a special one as I improved my PB by 6cm. As I was walking into the stadium with all the competitors, I got goosebumps,' he says. 'I was quite relaxed, though, as I knew what

I wanted to achieve.'

Poole got off to a nervous start, but he put in a confident gold-medal performance. 'When I cleared 2.24m and the bar was still shaking, I felt a sigh of relief as I jumped off the mat.'

Back home after a successful trip, the 2016 Western Province Grant Khomo Week scrumhalf enjoys 'a braai with family and friends', while international travelling is a must on his to-do list.

'Nairobi's culture and the way things were done was interesting to see,' says Poole, who has a long-term goal of making the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Tokyo could be where the 1.73m 'tall' high jump sensation becomes the next big thing in world sport ... ■

Hufkie is a Stellenbosch-based sports freelancer.



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