



VAN ZYL PLANS TO BOW OUT IN STYLE

Super hurdler has sights set on a medal-winning Games exit

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LJ VAN ZYL wants to end his successful career on a high with a medal at the Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast, Australia, in April after 15 years of being the country's best hurdler.

The TuksSport/HPC athlete is thinking of retiring at the end of the season to bring to an end a career which saw him win three medals at the Games and two at the world championships.

It was at the 2006 Commonwealth showpiece in Melbourne that he won his first medal at a major international athletics meeting when the current South African record holder won the 400m hurdles in a personal best at the time of 48.05 seconds.

"The cherry on top for me during the 2006 Games was the 4x400m relay. I still refer to it now when I talk at schools," Van Zyl said.

"The relay proved that no race is won or lost until you cross the finish line. If you look at a video of the race, you might think there was no way that we could have won a silver medal.

"I was running in fifth place going into the home straight. I was hoping to pass going into a gap on the inside of the track or between two of the front-runners, but there was no way through. The only option was to go wide.

"I can honestly say that over that last 50 metres I ran as I have done never before. Those two races at the Commonwealth Games set up my international career."

Van Zyl won his third medal at the Commonwealth Games in 2010 when he finished second in the 400 hurdles.

However, 2011 was undoubtedly the pinnacle of Van Zyl's hurdling career. In the space of just 95 days he managed to break through the magical 48-second barrier on four occasions, clocking the four fastest times of the year.

To top it all, he won a bronze medal at the world championships in Daegu and was part of the SA 4x400 relay team that won silver.

He admits that with age he started to mellow as an athlete over the years.

"When you are young, everything is about winning. If you lost you felt like a failure. It was like full out war out on the track. But slowly you start to realise that athletics should not just be about winning.

"Yes, winning will always be important, and again, yes, making money is also essential. But being an athlete is part of a journey," Van Zyl explained.

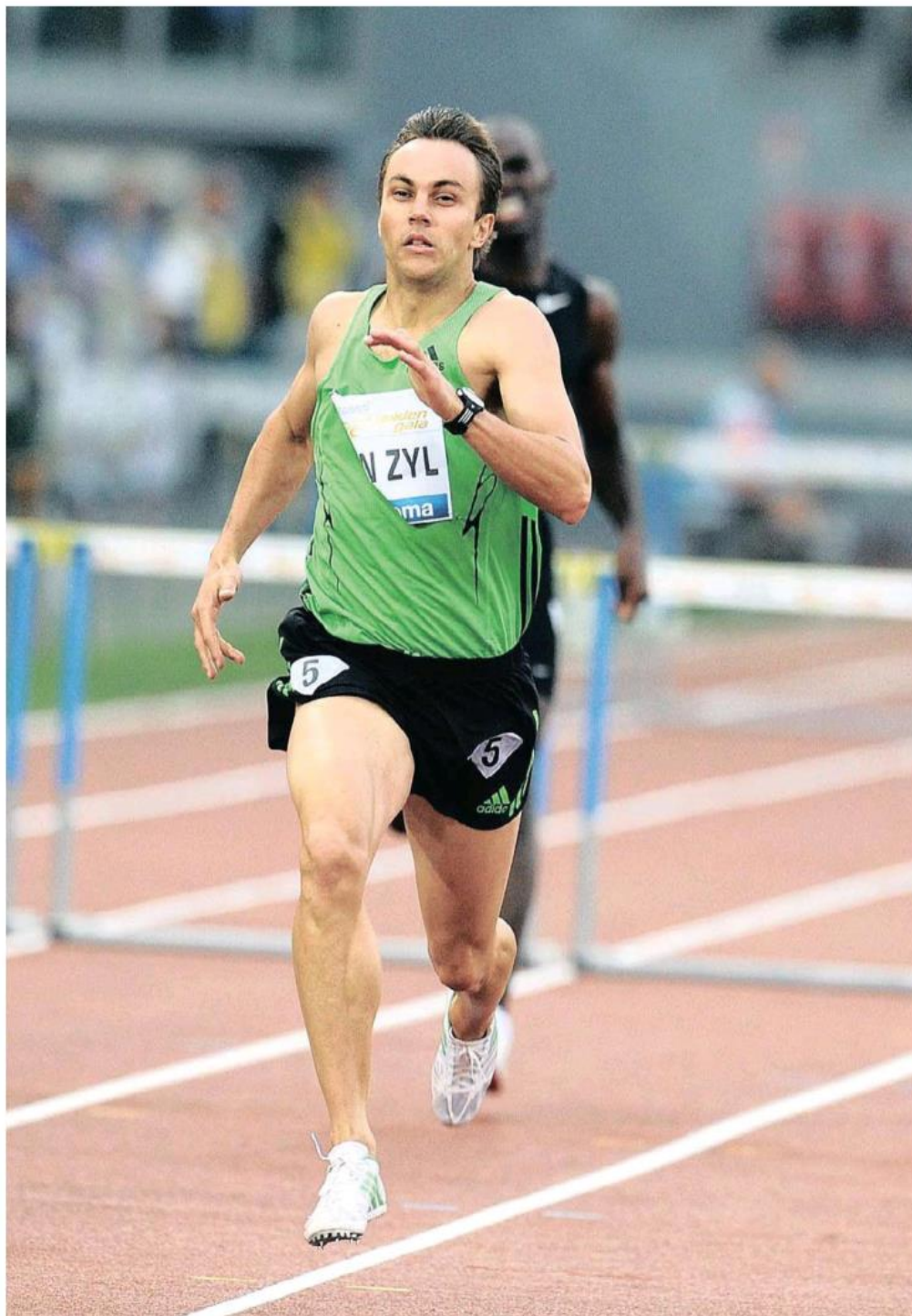
"Savouring moments on and off the track is for me equally as important as winning because no athletics career lasts forever."

However, despite what Van Zyl said, it would be a mistake for younger athletes to underestimate the elder statesman in the 400 hurdles at the Commonwealth Games as the hunger to be the best is still there.

"To be honest, I love to race. There is something so special to duel it out with other athletes on the track never knowing whether you are going to win, fighting it out right to the end. That is what an adrenaline rush is all about.

"I think I got addicted while I was still a *laaitie* racing the farm workers' children over feeding troughs. The faster and more experienced I got the more I started to crave the challenge of a good race."

The other TuksSport athletes in South Africa's Commonwealth Games team are Constant Pretorius (400 hurdles), Akani Simbine (100 and 200m), Lebogang Shange and Wayne Snyman (20km race walking), and Wenda Nel (400 hurdles).



SPRINTING TO GLORY: LJ Van Zyl has been the country's top hurdler and record holder for many years and will probably retire after the Commonwealth Games. He wants to do so with a bang by bringing home another medal.

PICTURE: EPA

