



Sprinter Magakwe opened the door for SA

Though the sport is still facing a steady trickle of controversy on the sidelines, South African athletics has done a virtual 180 in a relatively short period of time.

Wind back the clock four years and the comparison across the board makes for some interesting reading.

In March 2014, South Africa had zero track and field world champions. We now have three.

In 2014, the country had one Olympic medallist in athletics. We've now got four.

We had one world youth champion four years ago, and we now boast five of them.

In unofficial disciplines, the country held two world bests, and we now have five.

In 2014, it had been decades since South Africa had a world re-

cord holder in an official track and field discipline. We now have one of those too.

The turnaround can be attributed to a number of aspects.

Athletics SA has made huge strides in resolving their boardroom disputes and fixing their financial mess, and though they're still hitting hurdles along the way, there's a marked improvement in the way the sport is being run.

The standard of coaching has also evolved, with world-class coaches playing a role in developing athletes in various disciplines.

The real credit, however, must go to the athletes, who have collectively stood up and delivered by raising their own standards at domestic level, which has carried through to the international stage.

And it all started with one man:

 @wesbotton

AROUND THE BEND



Wesley Botton

Simon Magakwe.

Nearly four years ago, Magakwe lit up the Tuks Stadium track by storming to victory in 9.98 to win the men's 100m final at the national championships.

It was a defining moment in South African athletics, and though Magakwe went on to scratch a couple of years from a promising career with an anti-doping infringement landing him a lengthy ban, the rapid progress of the sport can be traced back to the stocky sprinter and

his historic sub-10 performance.

It's been a gradual process, and a number of athletes have played key roles in lifting the standards, including Anaso Jobodwana, Henricho Bruintjies, Akani Simbine and, of course, Wayde van Niekerk.

Among the women, Carina Horn has led a lone charge, but she too has done well to break long-standing national indoor and outdoor records.

Their success has also buoyed their compatriots in other events, including middle-distance runner Caster Semenya, javelin thrower Sunette Viljoen, and long jumpers Luvo Manyonga and Ruswahl Samaai.

The sprinters, however, have carried the flag, and their collective progression offers a glimpse of just how much the sport has

improved.

Four years ago, South Africa did not have a single sub-10 or sub-20 athlete in the men's 100m or 200m events.

Fast forward to this day, and we have five men who have gone under 10 seconds and three who have cracked the 20-second mark.

So it was fitting this week to see Magakwe back in form, sticking up his hand in the absence of some of the men who have built on his breakthrough performance.

Love him or hate him, Magakwe made the first move, and watching him win his first-round heat at the national championships offered a moment of reflection.

South African athletics has come a long way, and if the performances we've already seen this season are anything to go by, there's a lot more to come.

