



OCKERT DE VILLIERS



ACROSS THE LINE

AT AROUND 7.30pm on Thursday, organisers of the Athletix Grand Prix in Pretoria restricted any more people from entering the Tuks Stadium.

The venue had already reached its capacity in terms of health and safety regulations with close to 3 500 people squeezed into the main stadium and along the grass embankments.

Those who could not make it into the stadium peeped through the palisades on the eastern side of the arena to catch a glimpse of some of South Africa and the world's best track and field stars.

It was the biggest crowd a track and field meet has attracted to the Tuks venue in recent memory, and it was glorious.

Not a single spectator who paid to get into the stadium would have left unsatisfied as the stars produced a smorgasbord of athletics delight to starved track and field fans.

Is Tuks sell-out a new dawn for local athletics?

Any long-suffering fan would have battled to keep watery eyes at bay as they witnessed how the sport had gone from a flat line a few years ago, to recently showing a pulse, before furiously beep-beep-beeping on Thursday evening.

And while American world 100m champion Justin Gatlin was the proverbial carrot, the loudest cheers were reserved for the South African heroes.

Anaso Jobodwana, who is considered to be the catalyst to South Africa's current sprinting thanks to his maiden Olympic final in 2012, glided across the blue two-tone Mondo track on his way to a famous victory over one of the world's all-time speedsters.

He was Chad le Clos-esque as he looked around for any challengers but not even Gatlin with all his pedigree was up for the challenge.

South Africa's fastest man, Akani Simbine produced another world-class performance in the 100m, and while he may not have the same swagger as Jobodwana brings a different appeal to the sport.

Although the Jobodwana-Gatlin show grabbed all the attention, it was track queen Caster Semenya that drew the biggest cheers on the night.

Forget about her record-breaking run in the rarely-contested 1000m, it was Semenya, the 'Cobra' and the aura that surrounds her that makes her a fan favourite.

See, there is plenty local fare to feed our hunger for athletics but they need international flavour to make it stand out.

The feast was not limited to the supporters in the stands but also something this generation of athletes has not experienced on home soil.

Former world 400m bronze medalist LJ van Zyl waxed lyrically about what he had witnessed on Thursday as it marked one of the highlights of his career that spans over 15 years.

"We are really spoilt to have something like this, it is really nice, this is how I would like to remember athletics," Van Zyl said.

"This is like a World Challenge, almost like a Diamond League in my

own backyard."

Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games bronze medalist Johan Botha, who is now a middle-distance coach in Pretoria, said he last experienced a turnout like this during his heyday in the 1990s.

"It is great that there is a revival in athletics, I'm standing here with goosebumps, this happened last in my days," Botha said.

"I think this is extremely positive for South African athletics, they need to do it more often, and we need to invite more international athletes here."

South African athletics' pulse seems to be strong now we just need to make sure we keep it in a healthy state for future generations.

