

AK-47 to defend his home turf

OCKERT DE VILLIERS

NICKNAMED AK-47, South Africa's fastest man Akani Simbine will have to produce rapid fire in defence of his national 100m title as he will be the most hunted man in Pretoria this week.

Simbine will go up against one of the fastest fields ever assembled at the South African meet where multiple sub-10 second times could be on the cards.

The blue two-tone Mondo track belongs for all intents and purposes to Simbine, who has run four of his fastest times, all under 10 seconds, on this track.

South Africa's undisputed sub-10 second machine, Simbine has dipped below the magical mark a record 15 times since 2015.

"Everything in my group is going well, everything in my life is going well and I am excited for the season ahead and the next coming years," Simbine said after he posted a season's opener of 10.05 seconds at last week's Athletix Grand Prix in Pretoria.

"Every year we start off really quick and we kind of struggle at the end of the line but I am pretty happy with where we are at."

But Simbine will not be the only athlete on the track and he will go up against two former 100m national record-holders in Simon Magakwe and Henricho Bruinjies.

The biggest threat should come from in-form half-lap specialist Anaso Jobodwana, who is targeting his first sub-10 time in the short sprint.

"It hasn't haunted (dipping below 10 seconds) me because I haven't been fully committed to the 100 metres but I need to be a complete sprinter and I think I can do something in the 100m," Jobodwana said.

"When I was younger at around 2013, 2014 I heard a lot of people say you can go this fast and this fast."

"I never took it into consideration or seriously and now that I am maturing I can actually do well in the 100m and become one of those competitors which would also help my 200m."

Simbine and Jobodwana have never raced against each other but these championships will also see them go after a rare 100-200m double. While much of the attention would be on their duel, rising star and former national 200m champion Clarence Munyai could spring a surprise.

He is also set to race over both distances and will be buoyed by his recent performances in the short sprinting events. Munyai finished second behind Jobodwana at the first leg of the Athletix Grand Prix in Roodepoort, where he posted his second fastest time in the half-lap event by clocking 20.18.

He posted a new personal best 100m time at the Athletics Gauteng North Championships at the Tuks track a few days before winning his semi-final in 10.10.

Three-time world champion Caster Semenya will do the 800-1500m at the championships where her biggest challenge should come from US-based Dominique Scott-Efurl in the three-and-three-quarter laps race. The men's long-jump is set to be another mouth-watering affair with world champion Luvo Manyonga facing a quality local field.

Manyonga leapt to his maiden national title in Potchefstroom last year with a South African record-breaking jump of 8.65m.

World long-jump bronze medallist Ruswahl Samaai poses the biggest threat to his crown after opening the outdoor season with a creditable jump of 8.24m last week.

Three-time national champion Zarck Visser and former South African record-holder Khotso Mokoena has the pedigree to produce a big jump on the day and upset the applecart.

The men's 400m hurdles could also produce one of the highlights of the three-day championships where a loaded field will be racing over the barriers.

The one-lap hurdles have four Olympians that will be looking to wrest the title away from defending champion Le Roux Hamman.

Five of the top contenders have dipped below 50 seconds this year with Hamman's season's best of 49.22 seconds the fastest among the hurdlers. Former world bronze medallist LJ van Zyl and defending Commonwealth champion Cornel Fredericks have dominated the event since 2005 but will have to fight off the challenge from the young guns.

World youth record-holder Sokwakhana Zazini will be hoping to upset the big guns at his first senior championships. Zazini will be buoyed his two sub-50 second times in only his first year racing over the higher hurdles.

