

BONGANI VON BODENSTEIN

BORN TO PLAY

HIS BADMINTON INTEREST STARTED EARLY – AND HE HASN'T LOOKED BACK SINCE. BY REGGIE HUFKIE

When he picked up a badminton racket for the first time in Grade 2, Bongani von Bodenstein knew it was something he wanted to do for as long as possible.

So he committed fully from that point on. And the result? He was part of Team South Africa at the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games in Australia.

'The first time I played badminton was at Pinedene Primary School – simply because it was different, and my brother was playing it,' says Von Bodenstein, who was born and raised in Vanderbijlpark, Gauteng. 'I knew from the start that I wanted to play the sport for a long time and that I wanted to be one of the best in the country.'

And that's exactly what happened. After pushing for, and focusing on, consistency and development during his primary-school days, his career took flight during his time at Sasolburg High School. He's won South African titles in each age group he competed in and all the hard work and sacrifices paid off when he received his first call-up for national badminton duty in 2013.

His international debut kicked off at the All Africa U19 Championships in Algeria, and that year he made the cut for the team to wear the green

and gold at the World Junior Championships in Bangkok, Thailand.

In Algeria, Von Bodenstein and Anri Schoones went down in the first round of the mixed doubles in a tough encounter against Egypt, but instead of giving up, he learned from the failure and in 2015 his rise continued, as he was included in Badminton South Africa's U19 squad.

Next, he made a decisive move in aid of his career. 'I chose Tuks because I knew the support for the athletes is incredible, and also, their sporting infrastructure is top class. I'm currently studying Bcom accounting (accounting sciences); the CA route,' says the second-year student.

Balancing studies, top-flight badminton training and a social life can be very demanding, but the rising star is determined to succeed. 'My typical week looks like this: Monday to Friday I'll be up at 5am and then I'm in the

**VON BODENSTEIN
IN FIVE WORDS**

- God-fearing ▪ Determined ▪ Focused
- Friendly ▪ Inquisitive

gym by 7am. After that, I have classes throughout the day and training in the evenings. Friday I just go to gym, on Saturday it is technique training and Sundays is recovery and church.'

Talk about getting off to a flying start: In his first University Sport South Africa (USSA) badminton tournament, in 2016, he walked away with three gold medals – in the men's singles, mixed doubles and doubles.

And 2017 was no different. Despite suffering from a knee injury in the early stages of the tournament, Von Bodenstein went on to achieve the

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REG CALDECOTT

The fastest recorded badminton smash,
by Malaysia's Lee Chong Wei in 2015

408km/h

same results, making him the top individual player for a consecutive year. His efforts was once again recognised when was included in USSA's World Student Games team.

But that's not it: his 14 years of hard work and commitment was a buildup to what was coming in 2018: his inclusion in the team for the Commonwealth Games.

'To represent my country in Australia is an honour. I was at the gym when I found out and I was dumbfounded, but I realised the responsibilities that come with the selection. It means an increase in my training and a stricter diet, but it also means that I get to glorify God on a bigger platform.'

Being his biggest major international outing to date, the chartered accountant in-the-making planned on raising his game a notch in Gold Coast.

'My plans heading into the CWG are to acclimatise to the conditions and standard, keep up with the level of play, do my best and win where I can.'

He's yet to make his mark against the best in world, but the Carrara Sports and Leisure Centre might just be the venue where it happened. He's fast, agile and precise, and these skills place him in a position to outwit any opponent.

Looking to his future, Von Bodenstein says he's after national glory, more international experience - and the Olympic Games.

'I plan on trying to win our national senior tournament and playing three international tours thereafter. My personal goal is, of course, to get my degree and then represent South Africa at the 2020 Olympic Games.'

After 14 years of commitment to badminton, one could say that he's on the verge of becoming one of the most decorated players in the game, and this is only the start. ■

Hufkie is a Cape Town-based sports freelancer.

