



Hurdling ace LJ reveals how athletics beat his polio threat

OCKERT DE VILLIERS

ONE OF South African athletics' favourite sons LJ van Zyl has called time on an illustrious career that spanned over 17 years.

The South African 400m hurdles record-holder decided to hang up his spikes after he was eliminated in the heats at his fourth appearance at the Commonwealth Games earlier this month.

"When you are an athlete you get those butterflies in your stomach, it is a mixture of tension and excitement, and over the last few races that feeling was missing," Van Zyl said announcing his retirement.

"It is great to race and it is great to see the guys and to be part of that but that drive diminishes for a reason. I've been doing

it professionally for 16 or 17 years.

"I decided I didn't want to do athletics out of routine – when I run I really want to make a difference and not just be chasing after numbers."

It is 16 years since Van Zyl announced himself on the global stage when he was crowned 400m hurdles champ at the 2002 Junior Championships in Jamaica.

He set a new youth world best of 48.89sec a day before his 17th birthday.

The 32-year-old Van Zyl has represented South Africa at three Olympics and six senior World Championships, making his senior debut at Helsinki 2005.

Van Zyl has been one of the

most consistent one-lap hurdlers in the world, dipping below 50 seconds every year since 2002. He has posted 22 sub-48.50 times.

He won the gold medal at the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games and followed that up with a silver in Delhi 2010.

2011 would prove to be one of the highlights of Van Zyl's career, as he broke through the 48-second barrier on four occasions.

Van Zyl smashed Llewellyn Herbert's 11-year-old record in Pretoria on February 25, 2011 to open his dream season on a high.

The record earned him the R200 000 Pot of Gold which Athletics South Africa (ASA) and Yellow Pages set aside for senior



track and field records which were to be broken during the series.

Van Zyl used his incentive to grow his bonsmara cattle herd back in his Karoo hometown of Molteno.

"The two highlights of my career are definitely the night I broke the South African record at Tuks and the first time I broke through 48 seconds," Van Zyl said.

"I first ran a 48-zero in 2005 and I battled for four years to dip below 48 seconds and I thought at one point it wasn't going to happen."

He went into the 2011 World Championships with the world lead but could not reproduce the form at the global showpiece but still walked away with the bronze medal.

Van Zyl said athletics had changed his life, after meeting his wife and fellow Olympic athlete Irvette.

The athlete couple's second son is due in June, which also played a role in Van Zyl's decision call it a day.

He revealed yesterday that he had been diagnosed with polio as a child, with a prognosis that he would spend his life in a wheelchair.

"Over the past two weeks, I was counting my blessings and thought about what athletics has meant to me."

"When I was four-years-old I was diagnosed with polio and my one leg was thinning. My parents were told I would face a future in a wheelchair.

"But thanks to a miracle from

above and thanks to athletics or running it went away."

American Kevin Young's world-record run at the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games would ultimately inspire a young Van Zyl to take up the sport.

He would realise his dream of racing at the Olympic Games in Beijing 2008 where he finished in fifth place in the final.

"I continued with athletics and I watched the 400m hurdles at the 1992 Olympics which inspired me, and I believe athletics helped me to overcome the polio hurdle," Van Zyl said.

Van Zyl is completing his master's degree in education at Tuks and will remain involved in the sport in different capacities where he also hopes to be a mentor to young athletes.