

match. He wrapped up the victory another title yet, I just want to think about the way I have to 10th game and book a place in the final. – Reuters – Reuters Dimitrov of Bulgaria at the Monte-Carlo Rolex Masters tournament in France, yesterday.

LJ van Zyl ends illustrious athletics career

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 chasing after numbers."

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

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

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



LJ VAN ZYL competing during an international event in 2011.

PICTURE: TWITTER

Van Zyl has been one of the most consistent one-lap hurdlers in the world dipping below 50 seconds every year since 2002 while he has posted 22 sub-48.50 times.

He won the 400m hurdles gold medal at the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games and followed that up with a silver in Delhi 2010.

Twenty-one would prove to be one of the highlights of Van Zyl's career breaking through the 48-second barrier on four occasions.

Van Zyl smashed Llewellyn

Herbert's 11-year-old record at the Yellow Pages meeting 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 that 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 is 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 meeting his wife and fellow Olympic athlete Irvette.

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

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

"Over the last 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 Olympic Games 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.