



Caster may be SA's greatest athlete yet

She is the first South African to retain an Olympic Games title

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● Caster Semenya was named Female Athlete of the Century by Tuks Athletics this week, but the truth is her reign extends far beyond the realm of the 100-year-old sports club.

There were more contenders for the male prize, with 400m hurdler LJ van Zyl getting the nod over the likes of long-jumper Luvo Manyonga and high-jumper Jacques Freitag. Van Zyl never won world championship golds like the other two, but he was the first South African to win two medals at a single world championship, taking 400m hurdles bronze and 4x400m silver at Daegu 2011.

The next SA athlete to do that was Semenya at London 2017, winning 800m gold and 1.500m bronze.

Van Zyl doesn't hesitate when asked to name SA's greatest athlete, across both genders. "Caster. It has to be," he said.

"Whether you are measuring in terms of records or medals, it's Caster."

Her greatest feat as a South African, arguably, was settled in a courtroom this year when the bid by Mariya Savinova of Russia, the 2011 world champion and 2012 London Olympic gold medallist, to overturn her disqualification for doping was dismissed.

Semenya, the runner-up in both races, was upgraded to gold. Her Olympic enhancement, along with her 800m gold at Rio 2016, meant she became the first South African to retain a Games title, albeit retrospectively.

Since sprinter Reggie Walker claimed SA's first Olympic gold at London 1908, nobody has returned to the top of a games podium four years later.

There is also tragedy that arises from this state of affairs – that Semenya was robbed of the chance to achieve what could have been one of the great track victories.

Normally known for leading from the front in the 800m, Semenya was second from the back after the first lap of the final.

She then delivered a remarkably powerful



Caster Semenya, celebrating her Continental Cup victory, hasn't been beaten in an 800m contest since 2015. Picture: Getty Images

second lap, overhauling all her rivals with the exception of Savinova. Semenya pipped the then bronze medallist Ekaterina Poistogova, another Russian, by 0.3sec – what a dramatic victory that would have been, or should have been.

The 2011 world championship upgrade meant she also retained her 800m crown from the previous showpiece at Berlin 2009.

That makes Semenya one of three South Africans to do that, alongside high-jumper Hestrie Storbeck (2001 and 2003) and 400m king Wayne van Niekerk (2015 and 2017).

Semenya owns every South African record and best from 400m to 1.500m, and she has two Olympic golds, three world

championship golds and a bronze, and an impressive array of other silverware.

The women's world 800m record is in her sights, as is perhaps her dream of winning two Olympic titles at Tokyo 2020, in the 800m and either the 400m or 1.500m.

But that could depend on the outcome of her legal action against the IAAF for its planned rules to force athletes with hyperandrogenism to lower their naturally occurring high levels of testosterone.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) in Switzerland, which effectively upgraded her 2011 and 2012 golds, will decide on the matter.

If Van Zyl is right – and he probably is –

that Semenya is already SA's greatest track and field athlete of all time, what she does between now and the end of her career will determine her position among the country's pantheon of sporting greats.

That's the mythical realm where she goes up against the likes of former striker Benni McCarthy, cricketer AB de Villiers, Springbok star Victor Matfield and breaststroke queen Penny Heyns.

Take your pick. The person in possession right now is probably golfer Gary Player, with nine major titles from 1959 to 1978.

But Semenya isn't far behind.

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