



Sun Sports

Steenkamp's master's degree study highlights the problems SA female athletes face

A favourite past time amongst sports fans often is compiling lists of the supposed greats; athletes who would inspire others through their sporting feats.

Unfortunately, when it comes to South African women's athletics, it is not easy to do. Most ardent fans might find it challenging to come up with more than a few names.

Caster Semenya's name for obvious reasons is the first to spring to mind. It could also be argued that Sunette Viljoen (javelin) and Wenda Nel (400m-hurdles) through their heroics created awareness for women's athletics, but they are nearing the end of their careers.

Many are hoping that the Tuks athlete, Zency van der Walt, who over the last three years has won the 400m-hurdles at the IAAF Youth (under-18) and Junior (under-20) World Championships is going to become the next icon of women's athletics in South Africa and hopefully the world.

Rikenette Steenkamp (100m-hurdles), Carina Horn (100m) and Dominique Scott (5000m and 10000m) have been on the verge of making international breakthroughs over the last two years. And that is about it. When Athletics South Africa recently announced the provisional team for the World Championships in Doha, it clearly illustrated the problem women's athletics is currently facing. Out of a squad of 30, only three are women. It equates to a 10% representation.

Semenya, Van der Walt and Scott are the only three athletes to have so far qualified for the Championships. Steenkamp whose thesis for her master's degree at the University of Pretoria is - An exploration of the factors contributing to gender inequality in athletics participation and leadership - have found this to be a real problem in South African athletics for more than a decade.

Between 2007 to 2018 a total of 306

athletes (228 male and 78 female) represented South Africa at various senior international competitions. It means that 74.6% in the national team were male and only 25.4% female. It is interesting to note that of the 40 medals won 18 were due to the heroics of the female athletes.

Steenkamp has found through her study that a lack of talent is not the reason why so few female athletes get to represent South Africa. The problem is that there is no specific strategy in place to ensure that young athletes don't quit before they get to fulfil their true potential.

One of her concerns is the number of athletes from the more affluent high schools in Pretoria, who fall away in spite of getting every opportunity to become champions. She ascribes it to athletes often being pushed too hard too early.

What is also interesting from Steenkamp's findings is that often an under-15-athlete will be faster than under-18 or under-20 athletes.

"The most challenging time for any female athlete is going through puberty. Unfortunately, that is when they are often being pushed to their physical limits. The two years after finishing school is another difficult phase for young athletes. That is when quite a significant number of athletes tend to drop out.

Although it was not part of her study, Steenkamp could not help but note how different things are done in the USA. According to her, there seems to be seldom any mention of what happens during school athletics meetings. American collegiate athletics is the big thing. That is when athletes start to excel. During the recent championships, the 100 metres for women was won in a time of 10.75s.

Steenkamp believes that the decision makers in South African athletics should



consider rethinking the selection criteria. "In South Africa, it mostly about times. The faster, the better. Other countries like Switzerland follow a more holistic approach when it comes to team selections. Factors like a young athlete's growth and how they can handle pressure are also, for example, being taken into consideration. "What we need in South African athletics is a system that will help to keep athletes motivated. It needs to be fair and transparent. It might be a good thing to reconsider which athletes need to be supported by Athletics South Africa and Sasoc. Too often, athletes who have already established themselves in international athletics are being helped while talented young athletes who are on the verge of a major breakthrough are left to fend for themselves."



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