



Upcoming athletics star is a step closer to Olympic Games

One of her best qualities as an athlete is that she will fight until the last metre – no matter against whom she is running.

Pretoria's upcoming athletics superstar, Zeney van der Walt from Tuks Athletics, never race to finish second.

Of course, there are sometimes exceptions and last week's 400m hurdles final at the World Student Games in Napoli was one.

The race did not quite play out as the South African champion might have hoped. Italy's Ayomide Folorunso took the lead from the start and never relented.

Folorunso won the race in a time of 54.75s. Van der Walt was second in 55.73s, and Norway's Amalie Iuel finished third in 56.13s.

The positives Van der Walt can take from the race is that she ran a season's best time and is seemingly edging closer to the 54.70s she needs to run to qualify for next year's Tokyo Olympic Games.

By finishing second, the 19-year-old continued her unique legacy of being able to win a medal at every major championship at which she competed over the last three years. She won gold at the World Youth Championships and World Junior Championships.

Before the World Student Games, Van der Walt's coach, Maritza Coetzee, said the only aim was to win a medal.

"I see this season as Zeney's apprentice year as she is only now starting to compete against older and more experienced athletes regularly. Something else she had to adapt to is getting fewer opportunities to race. Last year, while still at school, she competed in 36 races.

"So far, it has only been about 11 in 2019," Coetzee explained.

She reiterated that Van der Walt's inexperience is no handicap.

"There is nothing Zeney relishes more than a good fight when racing. One of her best qualities as an athlete is that she will fight until the last metre, no matter against whom she is running," said Coetzee.

Van der Walt's goal at the World Championships in Doha is to at least qualify for the semi-finals.

"Knowing her, if she does so, she will have set her sights on reaching the final. It is going to be a tough challenge. It means Zeney will have to dip under 55 seconds," Coetzee added.

Having said that, Coetzee immediately added that she never want Zeney to settle in the starting blocks with any expectations from her as coach – or anyone else – to run fast times.

"The only thing that matters is that she gets to execute the perfect race, no matter in which event she is competing.

"If she does, there is always a chance of her achieving something special,"

Coetzee concluded.

Last year, Van der Walt ran a personal best time of 55.05s in the 400m hurdles.

Earlier this season, the Tuks athlete achieved

a personal breakthrough when she clocked a time of 52.89s in the 400m at a meet in Sopot, Poland.

Only three other local junior female athletes have managed to dip under 53 seconds in the 400m.

Pretoria's upcoming athletics superstar, Zeney van der Walt, won the silver medal in the 400m hurdles at the World Student Games in Italy.

Photo: Reg Caldecott

