



PODIUM IN SIGHT. Kirsten McCann is eyeing a medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 2020. Pictures: Gallo Images

Swimming's loss, rowing's gain

» SA's Kirsten McCann dreams of gold at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Wesley Botton

Kirsten McCann has always been drawn to sports, particularly those that take place in water, and after settling on one discipline in her youth, she has developed into one of South Africa's brightest medal prospects for next year's Tokyo Olympics.

Born in Joburg, McCann first attended St Mary's School before moving to St An-

draws, and her extracurricular activities included swimming, netball, athletics, lifesaving and ballet.

With all of her brothers having taken up the sport of rowing, however, McCann would regularly join her family on training camps and she eventually got into a boat herself.

"Most rowers will tell you that when you start, it hooks you," the 30-year-old McCann said this week, in the build-up to the 2019 season.

"I was adamant I still wanted to swim, but ultimately I followed my heart and focused on rowing."

Her talent was immediately evident, and despite her slight frame, McCann was soon gliding across Roodeplaad Dam

with oars in hand, developing the technique that would one day carry her to a world title.

McCann reached A finals (finishing among the top six boats) at the World Junior Championships in 2005 and 2006, and after leaving school she continued her studies at the University of Johannesburg.

Moving on from the junior ranks, she became an integral part of the national rowing squad coached by Roger Barrow at Tuks, and in 2010 she earned bronze in the lightweight single sculls final at the U-23 World Championships in Belarus.

Gradually climbing the ladder at senior level over the next few years, McCann enjoyed a career breakthrough in 2015 when she stepped on the podium at the World Rowing Championships.

Joining compatriot Ursula Grobler, who ditched her allegiance to the United States to create a formidable partnership with McCann, the duo secured bronze in the lightweight double sculls event at the world showpiece in Aiguebelette.

Though they went on to achieve two more podium places in the World Cup series the following year, establishing themselves as medal favourites at the 2016 Olympics, McCann and Grobler lost out in the final, settling for fifth position in Rio.

Shaking herself off the following season, McCann made a return to the singles boat, and after winning the World Cup race in Lucerne she went on to make history in Sarasota by becoming the first South African woman to win a gold medal at the senior World Championships.

With no singles divi-

sion on the programme at next year's Olympics, McCann switched back to the doubles boat last season, and while she missed the A final at the World Championships in Plovdiv, she took second place in the B final with 23-year-old Nicole van Wyk.

Needing to go one spot better in order to secure early qualification for the Tokyo Games, McCann and Van Wyk were eager to finish among the top seven at this year's World Championships, to be held in Ottensheim in August.

And though she had enjoyed significant success on her own in the singles boat, McCann said she was pleased to be competing in the doubles class again in preparation for another medal charge in Tokyo.

With Van Wyk having earned two medals at the U-23 World Championships, she and McCann were a promising partnership, and they had two more seasons to work together as a team ahead of the Olympics.

"I've always enjoyed variety and I was always really good on my own (in the singles boat)," McCann said.

"But I'm also a team player, and I like that aspect of the sport and the team vibes.

"So I think singles and doubles are both appealing because they're so different, and I'm satisfied either in a team or on my own.

"As long as I'm rowing, I'm happy to be out there."



OUT OF LUCK. McCann with her partner Ursula Grobler at the 2016 Rio Olympics.

