



LOOK OUT. Tatjana Schoenmaker announced herself in epic fashion during the Commonwealth Games at Gold Coast this year. Picture: Gallo Images

Tatjana, a true trailblazer

➔ **Schoenmaker leading the revival of women's swimming in South Africa.**

Wesley Botton

Though she burst onto the scene earlier this year with a breakthrough effort at the Commonwealth Games, showcasing her tremendous potential, Tatjana Schoenmaker's ultimate ambitions stretch well beyond her own performances in the pool.



GOLD RUSH. Schoenmaker poses with one of her two gold medals at the Commonwealth Games. Picture: Getty Images

The 21-year-old Tuks swimmer has stuck up her hand by breaking a lengthy drought for South African women, and she hopes to use her achievements as a springboard in an attempt to lead a revival in the sport.

Between 2011 and 2017, South African swimmers earned 12 medals at the Fina World Championships, 15 at the Fina World Short-Course Championships, 12 at the Commonwealth Games and six at the Olympic Games, but all 45 podium places were achieved by men.

With local women left floundering, struggling even to qualify for major international championships over the last decade, a saviour was required to spearhead a resurrection. Enter Schoenmaker.

After raking in four gold medals at the 2015 African Games in Brazzaville, at the age of 18, the breaststroke specialist went on to secure the silver medal over the 200m distance at last year's World Student Games in Taipei.

It was earlier this season, however, that she made the biggest statement of her career thus far at the Commonwealth Games on Australia's Gold Coast.

Schoenmaker won the women's 100m and 200m breaststroke titles, clocking 1:06.41 and 2:02.22 respectively, while narrowly missing out on the bronze medal in the 50m sprint (30.82).

She broke the African records in all three events, becoming the first SA woman in eight years to earn a medal in the pool at a major global championship, and the first able-bodied SA woman in 64 years to bag a swimming medal at the Commonwealth Games.

Last week she was in top form once again, delivering superb performances

at the SA Short-Course Swimming Championships in Durban where she won the women's 50m, 100m and 200m breaststroke finals.

In the process, she shattered the South African records in the 50m (30.39) and 100m (1:05.12) events in the 25m pool and eclipsed the last remaining mark held by local icon Penny Heys.

While she qualified in all three events, her coach Rocco Meiring revealed this week that Schoenmaker was unlikely to turn out at the World Short-Course

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The last time an able-bodied SA woman won a swimming medal at the Commonwealth Games before Schoenmaker did this year.

Championships in Hangzhou in December, with her international career taking a back seat to her financial management studies for the rest of the year.

She is expected to return to competition at next season's SA Championships where she hopes to qualify for the 2019 World Championships in Gwangju.

"Tatjana and I still need to sit down and discuss the way forward, but our plan has always been that she should have a degree by the end of 2019," Meiring said.

"From a coaching perspective, she needs to do a big block of intense training. If it is decided that she will compete at the World Short Course Championships the question remains as to when she is going to do the long, hard hours in the pool."

Outside the pool, Schoenmaker has been equally active in bringing together role players to assist in the revival of SA women's swimming.

She played a key role in organising an international training camp in Pretoria earlier this year, offering invites to multiple SA women including teenagers Dune Coetzee, Kaylene Corbett, Nathania van Niekerk and Christin Mundell.

For now, the quietly spoken crusader will have one eye on her books in an effort to secure her B Comm degree at the University of Pretoria, with the other remaining firmly focussed on the pool.

Her competitive swimming career may be on temporary hold but Schoenmaker will be back, and with age on her side, she's likely to be both stronger and faster. While she remains modest about her potential, and relatively silent on her ambitions, she will be out to prove that female South African swimmers have the ability to match the achievements of their esteemed male compatriots, including the likes of Chad le Clos and Cameron van der Burgh who have set the pool alight in recent years.

"Thinking back to training, how hard this season was, I can't imagine how the next season will be," Schoenmaker said in a recent interview.

"But hopefully I can be on form at next year's World Championships and then the 2020 Tokyo Olympics."

