



Her small steps became world record leap

'I started with water safety when I was five years old, but began competing when I was eight.'

Noxolo Sibiya

Allowing your small improvements to catch up with world standards...

This is how a 20-year-old Pretoria swimmer scooped a gold medal at the Commonwealth Games in Australia.

Tatjana Schoenmaker competed in the 100m and 200m breaststroke in April this year.

She became the first able-bodied female swimmer to win a Commonwealth gold since South Africa's readmission to international sport.

Her time for the 100m breast stroke was a new African record of 1:06.41 beating Penny Heyns' 19-year-old previous record time of 1:06.47.

"It felt nice, the fact that I could share that moment with so many people when I got back was a great feeling," she said.

"It's always nice breaking records and getting medals, but for me sharing the experience with everyone was the highlight."

The most pleasant realisation, she said, was when she returned home to learn that many South Africans were inspired by her contribution to international sport.

She started swimming when she was five years old and was already competing at the age of eight.

"I started with water safety at the age of five, but I started competing at the age of eight."

"That's when I won the 20m fly and my parents realised then that swimming was for me."

She said her journey was not always easy as she has had to face an athlete's worst nightmare – injuries.

She has had to overcome a recurring shoulder injury which kept her out of the pool for months.

"The shoulder injury would put me out for months each time at least three times and I have had groin injuries before," she said.

"During that time, I trusted the rehabilitation process and took things easy knowing that I would soon be back in the pool."



Tatjana Schoenmaker wins gold in the 200m breaststroke at the Gold Coast Aquatic Centre at the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Gold Coast in Australia. Picture: Wessel Oosthuizen / SASPA



In preparation for the Commonwealth Games, the Hatfield based swimmer took a break during the festive season.

"Starting January I had to be ready for the season so I had to take in the holidays so that I was well rested for the season."

She swims at least eight sessions a week and tries to squeeze three gym sessions. This is the routine for 12 weeks every season.

Schoenmaker is a financial science student at the University of Pretoria where she also practises her strokes.

She said she did not have a strict diet, but opted for healthy food with a few guilty pleasures every now and again.

"If I really wanted to have an ice-cream I would have it, but I wouldn't have an ice-cream every day," she said.

The first of two children, she said her family had always been her pillar strength. Her parents were in Australia to watch her

during the Commonwealths, reflecting their solid support.

"They obviously want the best for me and it wouldn't matter if I won the medal or not, they still would have been proud of me."

She advised up-and-coming swimmers to focus on their own race and not be pressured.

"Focus on your race, make small improvements in your own performance. Eventually your small improvements will catch up with world standards."

