



Nathania van Niekerk qualified in the 200m-backstroke for the Commonwealth Games in Australia. Photos: Reg Caldecott

Drowning in distinctions

'Despite major challenges, Nathania van Niekerk last year excelled academically as well as in the swimming pool.'

Koos Venter

A "goal-getter par excellence" will be a good way to describe Nathania van Niekerk, last year's TuksSport High School's head girl.

At the beginning of 2017, she had set herself two goals – to excel in her matric exams and to qualify in the 200m-backstroke for the Commonwealth Games in Australia.

She achieved both.

Van Niekerk achieved six distinctions, and in December in Durban, she won the 200m backstroke in 2:14.75 which was what she needed to do to be in contention for selection for the games.

She missed out on a mere 0.06 seconds to qualify for the 100m-backstroke as well.

Emotionally and physically drained was how Van Niekerk felt after her swim in the 200m-backstroke and with just reason.

For the duration of her exams, she never toned down on her training.

On the days she wrote exams, she would get up in the early hours of the morning to study for two extra hours.

After finishing writing, she would train for up to four hours mostly on her own. Then she would put in another four hours of studying.

It is a matric tradition to go for a big 'jol' after the exams. That was not destined for Van Niekerk.

The moment the exams ended, the real training in the pool started.

"I had no choice. I took a break from swimming backstroke, so it was essential to get my body reacquainted as to what it takes to swim. Time was of the essence as I had to be as close as possible to my best at the trials," she explained.

Between chasing fast times in the pool and studying to improve

her knowledge, Van Niekerk had to fulfil her obligations as a head girl.

It was something she cherished.

"I think I got to understand what 'juggling' is about last year. Make every second count every day."

It is not a foregone conclusion that Van Niekerk will be selected, but hopefully, the selectors will take into account that in 2016 she missed out by 0.60s to qualify for the Olympic Games in Rio in the 200m-backstroke, proving that she is a consistent performer.

Van Niekerk said she currently ranked as the 13th best 200m-backstroke swimmer in the Commonwealth countries.

However, she was confident that from now to April she would be able to improve on the time she swam in Durban.

"If I can get close to my best time of 2:11.33 there is a real chance for me to qualify for the final at the Commonwealth Games."