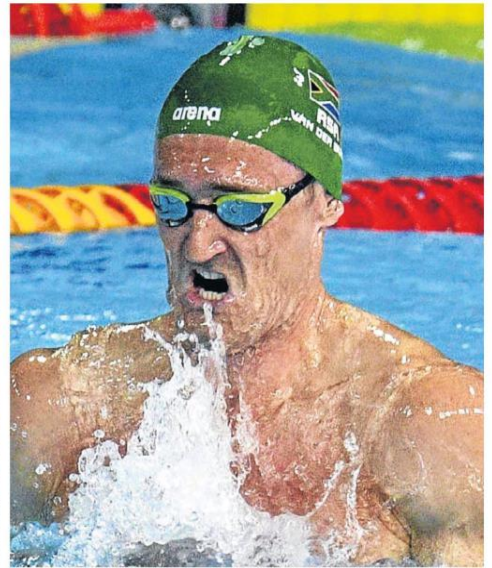




Penny drops for Tatjana



From left, Chad Le Clos, Tatjana Schoenmaker and Cameron van der Burgh will all be starting for SA in the showpiece in China — the world short-course championships — come December. Pictures: Gallo Images

Legendary Heyns cheers Schoenmaker China qualifying time

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● Penny Heyns was a spectator when Tatjana Schoenmaker completed her first race of the national short-course championships at the Kings Park pool this week.

Heyns, the double breaststroke Olympic champion from the 1996 Games in Atlanta, shouted to Schoenmaker, the double breaststroke Commonwealth Games champion from Gold Coast 2018, as she exited the pool.

Schoenmaker had just achieved a 200m breaststroke qualifying time for the world

short-course championships in China in December. The 21-year-old looked up to see Heyns gesture her praise. Schoenmaker smiled back.

Their interaction was brief, but the moment aptly signalled the resurgence of women's swimming in this country. No women qualified for the 2016 Rio Olympics, but Tokyo 2020 should be different. Schoenmaker, Erin Gallagher, Emily Visagie and Cape Town schoolgirl Rebecca Meder cracked qualifying times for the showpiece in China.

So far there are six male qualifiers, including Chad Le Clos and Cameron van der Burgh, who returned to training only three weeks ago after returning from honeymoon.

He celebrated in the water last night after making the 100m breaststroke criterion. "I was a little nervous after the morning," Van der Burgh said, referring to his effort in the heats where he missed the mark by more

than a second.

National coach Graham Hill said he hadn't seen such a strong female showing in terms of qualifiers for years.

"We've been criticised over the past two Olympic cycles. It's been on all the coaches' minds. I've been talking to them. I think the girls' drive is real."

Schoenmaker has witnessed the change herself. "I think we're doing very well compared to a few years ago when nobody was qualifying," said Schoenmaker, who clocked 1min 5.12sec in the 100m breaststroke last night to break Suzaan van Biljon's 10-year-old South African record.

The women have delivered the most exciting race of the meet so far; Meder fought hard to win the 200m individual medley as she beat off the fast-approaching Schoenmaker and Marlies Ross.

Schoenmaker and Gallagher are the only swimmers to have broken South African

records to date.

The six male qualifiers range in age from 20 to 30, the youngest being University of Alabama student Zane Waddell, an exciting talent who floats on the water. He'd already qualified in the 100m freestyle by the time he did it again in the 50m backstroke yesterday.

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but he still celebrated with passion as he punched the water.

Le Clos and Van der Burgh have dominated South African swimming for nearly a decade, and the glory days of SA's women are distant memories.

Schoenmaker was just three years old the

last time a South African woman climbed onto an Olympic podium — Heyns at Sydney 2000.

Overall, more South African women have won Olympic medals than men — 12 to seven. But the men, starting with Terence Parkin in 2000, have won more medals, 10 to the women's eight.

Schoenmaker is being tipped for Tokyo silverware.

There's a possibility that she may not be available for China because of her tough schedule at the University of Pretoria. The B Com student is ploughing through extra subjects and wants to graduate by the end of 2019.

Her coach, Rocco Meiring, said it's about priorities. "What applies to a professional swimmer doesn't apply to an amateur who's studying."

And if she goes to China, she will probably have to contribute financially, as will

most of the team. Swimming SA (SSA) CEO Shaun Adriaanse said the federation would subsidise a portion of the estimated R35,000 price tag for each swimmer.

The only exception would be the few who enjoy funding from the SA Sports Confederation and Olympic Committee's Operation Excellence programme — Le Clos, Van der Burgh and Brad Tandy.

This pay-to-go scenario is not new for swimmers, nor for sports people in other small codes.

The national hockey women's players were in danger of having to cough up to get to the World Cup in London before a late sponsorship was sealed.

But Adriaanse said they found the cash to send eight young swimmers, including Gallagher and Meder, to Europe for racing experience.

That investment is already paying dividends.

