

10 Cheers for 10 Years!



Text: Rick de Villiers Image: Reg Caldecott

With the hpc's 10th anniversary coming up, The Medalist takes a walk down memory lane.

Cast your mind back ten years. Your initial decade-old memory might be of a younger, thinner you. But you probably wouldn't remember that petrol sold at an unthinkable R2.23 per litre, or that the Queen Mother passed away that year. It's unlikely that you'd recall who won the first American Idol competition (Kelly Clarkson) or what you got for Christmas. You almost certainly wouldn't pin 2002 as the year that the High Performance Centre opened its doors.

It's not as if the occasion was inauspicious. Among those attending the official ribbon-cutting on that crisp May evening were sports luminaries like Gary Bailey, Daan du Plessis, and Danie Visser. Also caught in sparkle of flashing cameras were then-Minister of Sport, Ngconde Balfour, and the former president of Athletics SA, Leonard Chuene. Prof. Callie Pistorius, rector of the University of Pretoria at the time, beamed like a proud parent and made so bold as to declare the hpc the new address of sport in Africa.

All the bricks had been laid, all the nooks had been dusted. The centre boasted conference facilities, an auditorium, high-end accommodation lockers, a restaurant, a sports-science gym, medical offices and a sports-technology unit. The members of staff were geared and expertise was on tap. All that remained was

for the hpc to live up to the hype surrounding it.

Within that year the centre played host to the Belgian Olympic team, and also received a number of eminent guests, among whom one of the most famous names in soccer, Sir Alex Ferguson.

On the development front, three academies were initially established (gymnastics, swimming, tennis), and it took little time for serious athletes to make South Africa's newest sports hub their home. But what distinguished (and still distinguishes) the hpc from other sports centres was the founding of a school that catered specifically for the needs of promising youngsters.

In 2002, only 27 learners were enrolled at the TuksSport Study Centre (now TuksSport High School), but this number has since mushroomed to over 200. The



academies, too, have multiplied. The hpc quickly left behind its humble beginnings and incorporated a number of other sports into their portfolio. Soccer (men's and women's), taekwondo, rowing, golf, cricket, athletics, table tennis, judo and triathlon are all now part of the stable.

But what makes the hpc special is that it's a home away from home. Countless international teams and sportspeople have signed the hotel register, and some have left even more permanent reminders of their visit. The most notable archaeological traces belong to the Argentinean soccer team, who made the hpc their base camp during the 2010 FIFA World Cup. At the request of the (in)famous Diego Maradona, new luxury toilets ('E-Bidets' to the value of R14 000) were installed. The squad's legacy also lives on in a new suite (Maradona had a wall between two rooms broken down

to ensure he had enough personal space) and in the unforgettable memories of those boys who were elected to carry the players' bags.

Toby Sutcliffe, CEO of the hpc, thinks this a good example of the hpc's ability to accommodate the needs of its clients. 'You can't be all things to all men, but it's our policy to make sure our visitors are happy. In this business, it's adapt or die – and hosting the Argentinean team certainly showed that we can adapt.

'The project was an unbelievable experience, and so too seeing the manner in which all the staff entered into the project. Nothing was ever too big or too menial to do, and everyone pitched in to ensure that we offered them the best experience possible.'

There probably isn't another FIFA World Cup on the horizon for South Africa, but hpc has proven itself

capable to deal with any kind of challenge. Though there will be no further branching out among the academies, the centre hopes to carry on its tradition of excellence and remain the beacon for specialist sports centres in South Africa. So for the ten years past and those yet to come, let us raise our glasses!