

hpc Sponsored Athletes at the Olympics

Text: Vata Ngobeni, Chief sport writer for the Pretoria News

The London Olympics are gone and only memories are left but it is the lessons learnt that will put Team South Africa in a better place to attain more medals at the next Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016.

Nobody will be craving for gold more than former 800metres women's world champion and Tuks athlete Caster Semenya after the drama of the past four years ended with something of a silver lining when she became the first black South African female to win a medal at the Olympics.

Semenya has a knack of leaving things until late from her qualification for the Olympics which was ironically attained at the Tuks Athletics Stadium earlier this year to the finals race inside the majestic Olympic Stadium in London.

If things had gone differently Semenya could have arrived back home with a gold medal around her neck but it seems for now the silver medal will do for the Limpopo-born lass who was undoubtedly one of the crowd favourites in London.

Her time of 1:57.23 was the fourth fastest time run this year and put her just over a second behind World and now Olympic Champion Mariya Savinova and ahead of another Russian, Ekaterina Poistogova.

Semenya started the race slowly and took the bell at the halfway mark behind the frontrunner, American Alysia Montano, and was struggling as she ran in last place of the eight finalists.

On the back straight though Semenya surged to forward showing great speed and had there been an extra 10metres, Semenya could have crossed the line ahead of Savinova.

Semenya's silver medal is still a major accomplishment for an athlete that was humiliated, mistreated and almost had her career ended prematurely when she was unjustifiably subjected to gender tests after being crowned world champion three years ago.

In retrospect the 21 year-old Semenya still has plenty of time ahead of her and while she has often been criticized for her late surge in races there is

almost no doubt that she will be a factor in Rio.

"I've been waiting all year for this. The last four years have not been easy. I'm already thinking about Rio and I hope I'll be there. That final race at the Olympics was very fast but I was not worried. It doesn't matter if you are at the back or the front, it matters how you finish the race," Semenya said.

While Semenya believes that she has learnt valuable lessons that will arm her well for Rio, she does concede that her coach former world 800metres champion Maria Mutola was not happy that she could not get gold.

"My coach was not happy, but you learn from your mistakes. I tried hard to go with them but the body was not really on fire and I had to fight to the end," Semenya said about her race to silver.

It is not just Semenya who has learnt valuable lessons from London in the hope of achieving the golden dream for Rio.

Swimmer Darren Murray may have failed to make the semi-finals of the 200metres backstroke as he



crashed out in the heats but Murray is determined to follow in the wake of star swimmers Chad Le Clos and Cameron van den Burgh.

Murray clocked a time of 2:00.01 in his heat finishing in a credible 25th place overall in the heats, failing to qualify for the semifinals.

"Being at the Olympics was a fantastic experience for me and it made me believe that I can do even better going forward. I can't say I am disappointed in my performances but it was the perfect opportunity for me to make a name for myself. I am more determined than ever to do well at the next Olympics and follow in the footsteps of Chad. Chad is younger than me by a year and look what he did on the biggest stage in the world. It is not that I am comparing myself to Chad but he has inspired me to do well and actually fight to be the best in the backstroke," said Murray who won gold in the 200metres and silver in the 100metres backstroke events at the All Africa Games in Maputo last year.

Murray moved up from Cape Town to Pretoria to help accelerate his swimming career and besides making history as the first swimmer of colour to participate at the Olympics, it is now a goal of Murray's to become the first swimmer of colour to win a medal in the pool for South Africa at an Olympic Games.

"I have to put pressure on myself

because it is the only way I can swim faster. I want to win an Olympic medal, Chad's success has made me hungrier to do so. I want to do it for myself, my country and many of those young kids of colour out there who don't believe that a young black kid can swim. I'm targeting Rio but before that it is important for me to do well at the world championships and other major swimming events in the years leading to 2016," Murray said.

Another Tuks swimmer based at the High Performance Centre Karin Prinsloo will only get better and after the disappointment of London will be one of the favourites to medal in Rio.

Prinsloo failed to make the cut in the women's 200m freestyle heats after registering a time of 1:59.24 which meant that Prinsloo finished 20th overall.

The often emotional Prinsloo is destined to come good in Rio and while the semi-finals eluded her in London, she too has plenty of years ahead of her to make waves on the international swimming scene.

"It was a dream come true for me. I really wanted to qualify for the Olympics in Beijing, but I do not think I was ready for it mentally and physically. I was very disappointed, and had to wait for another four years to give it a try, that is why all the tears flowed when I finally achieved this at nationals. I thought qualifying for the Olympics I put myself under a lot of

pressure, but nothing prepared me for the Olympics. I just wanted to swim my best times and go through to the next round but could not achieve that in the 200 freestyle."

"I was very upset with myself. But one thing I decided is that I am ready for the next Olympics. I was really hoping to be a little better this time, but I am young enough to make it to Rio," she said.

For Suzaan van Biljon, the 2012 Olympics was a vindication of her return to international sport.

Van Biljon had retired from swimming two years ago after losing her will to compete and even though her return back to competitive swimming didn't end in a medal it was enough for the 24-year-old to break Penny Heyns' South African record which has stood since 1999 in qualifying for the final which Van Biljon eventually finished in seventh place in the 200m breaststroke.

"I exceeded my expectation with my time. It's really put the desire and motivation back to work hard and achieve something in my swimming again. Watching Cameron and Chad win medals has made me want to keep on getting better. It's really put the desire and motivation back to work hard and achieve something in my swimming again," Van Biljon had said afterwards.

Olympic gold, silver and bronze



medalist Roland Schoeman may have returned from London empty handed but the former Willowridge High School scholar continued to prove that he is still competitive even though he is at the twilight of his career and was one of the few athletes who did much of his preparations for the London Olympics away from South Africa.

Roland came close to picking up a medal in a fast 50metres freestyle final finishing in sixth place.

Talking about records, Tuks walker Marc Mundell set a new African record in the 50km race walk that saw Russian Sergey Kiryapkin take the gold in an Olympic record time of 3:35:59.

Mundell was the first South African male to walk in the 50km event since the country's return to the Olympics at Barcelona in 1992.

Ever gracious Mundell's delight at breaking the African record was made sweeter by the fact that it was an even better time to that which he had gained Olympic qualification with of 3:57:57 earlier in the year.

"It was a fantastic opportunity to be at the Olympic games. I gave it everything possible to walk a new African record."

"To take almost two and a half minutes off my previous best is testimony to how hard we have had to work," Mundell said.

It is painful when talking about the early exit of 400metre hurdler LJ van Zyl who failed to get beyond the heats.

Unfortunately for Van Zyl, who had been a certain medal hopeful, the London Olympics will be another major competition not worth remembering as he had arrived in London suffering from an injury picked up in the build-up to the Olympics.

Things got worse for Van Zyl and his teammates Willie de Beer, Ofentse Mogawane, Shaun de Jager and Oscar Pistorius as they made it into the 4x400metres relay final through a technicality after being tripped in the semi-final but finished in a disappointing last position.

Back in the water, Lee-Ann Persse and Naydene Smith left London with their heads held high after finishing in second place in the B-final of the women's coxless pair crossing the line in 7:55.18 which was the 8th fastest time overall.

It was in the water that South African triathlete Richard Murray, who trains at the hpc for three months a year, lost ground on the leading bunch in the men's elite race and eventually finished in a credible 17th place in a time of 01:49:15.

In judo, Gideon van Zyl failed to advance beyond his first bout when he was beaten by an ippon (match

winning throw) just 30 seconds from the end of the fight while he was ahead.

Lastly on the football pitch, it may not have been a great tournament for Banyana Banyana as they failed to win a single match but the South Africans proved worthy of being counted amongst some of the best teams in the world and showed the potential of beating the best when they managed to hold reigning world champions Japan to a goalless draw in their last game.

Having lost their opening two matches to Sweden (1-4) and Canada (0-3), the South Africans draw with Japan would have been a major boost for them ahead of the 2012 African Women's Championship to be played in Equatorial Guinea and Gabon in November.

The hpc played a role in Banyana Banyana's road to the Olympics with Robyn Moodaly currently studying at the TuksSport High School while Kylie-Ann Louw, Marry Ntsweng, Nompumelelo Nyandeni, Janine van Wyk and Nothando Vilakazi are ex-hpc Soccer Academy players.

