

Capable Caster

Text: Wilhelm de Swardt Images: Reg Caldecott



Bruce Willis is one of Hollywood's most prominent action star heroes. As the ex-cop, John McClane, in the 'Die Hard' series, Willis was involved in perpetual action. In contrast to this, Willis also played the role of a child psychologist in 'The Sixth Sense', a movie that is all about suspense. The viewer senses that something dramatic is going to happen but is not sure when it will happen.

With this in mind, it should not be surprising that Bruce Willis is the favourite actor of Caster Semenya, the top female athlete of the Tukkies High Performance Centre. Semenya's performances in the 800 metres could be seen as symbolic of Willis' movies.

When Semenya runs, it is usually an all-action affair with the talented 18-year old challenging the stopwatch right from the starting pistol, leaving her rivals behind on the track. In contrast to this, in an equally suspenseful affair, Semenya stars in her own version of 'The Sixth Sense'.

Ever since Semenya had won the 800 metres at the Yellow Pages Meeting in Germiston in the really fast time of 2:00.58, everybody knew that she has what it takes to become only the 4th South African female athlete to run a sub-two-minutes 800 metres. But the big question remains: 'When will it happen?'

Since 6 March there has been an air of expectation among athletic supporters every time Semenya was under the starter's orders for the 800 metres.

You can actually hear them thinking and hoping: "Is it going to be this time."

But, as in 'The Sixth Sense', if something is expected to happen, it never does.

As 'director' and 'co-director', Semenya and her coach, Michael Seme, are not about to give away the 'plot', apart from promising that a sub-two 800 metres is in the offing. So, for the spectators it remains a case of watching and hoping.

When not running, Semenya is a shy teenager who studies Sports Science at Tukkies.

She is quite modest about her running achievements. "I don't know where my running talent comes from, because there are no other runners in my family. But they have always given me such good support that I don't want to let them down."

Semenya, who grew up in the Limpopo Province, did not always choose athletics as her favourite sport. At first soccer was the only sport for her and she was not bad at it either.

"I enjoyed dribbling the ball and chasing after opponents, but while I was playing soccer, I always had a feeling that something was missing. Every time I ran during a soccer game, I experienced a wonderful feeling of freedom. It was as if I just wanted to keep on

running. But, of course, in a soccer game you do not just run for the sake of running.

"That was why I went to the teachers and asked them whether they would allow me to participate in athletics. I started as a sprinter but quickly realised that my strength as a runner was in long-distance. That is how it came about that I am now a 800 metres athlete."

The pundits agree that, aged just 18, Semenya has a truly amazing running talent. She already boasts with the fourth-best time in the 800 metres ever run by a South African female athlete. Only Zelda Pretorius (1:58.35 in 1991); Ilze Wicksell (1:59.39 – 1983) and Eranee van Zyl (1:59.70 – 1983) have run faster. When she ran 2:00.58 in Germiston, she also improved the South African junior record set by the legendary Zola Budd way back in 1984. Just this season she has improved her time by 3.75 seconds. In athletic terms this is considered a massive improvement. She is the current South African senior and junior champion in the 800 metres and during last year's Commonwealth Youth Games in India she won a gold medal.

Her coach, Michael Seme, is adamant that he is not going to pressure Semenya to run a sub-two 800 metres.

"I know that she is capable of doing it, but I am a firm believer that all things happen in good time. For me it is actually a case of baby steps. At the moment our first goal is a gold medal at the African Junior Championship in Mauritius. I see the World Championship in Berlin as an excellent learning experience for Caster, but she may just surprise us all time-wise."

Semenya herself is hoping to run a two-minute 800 metres in Mauritius.

"I am not going to say anything about the World Championship. For me it will just be a privilege to run against the world's best."

When asked what she enjoyed most about running, her answer was: "Don't ask me. I just enjoy running."

Apart from running and studying, movies are the main passion in her life.

Her favourite actress is Queen Latifah.

"The movie I enjoyed most, is Queen Latifah in 'Taxi'. You should see how, and at what speed, she drives her taxi in that movie. It is as if she is possessed. I have already seen the movie five times and I still enjoy every moment of it."

Actually, it is not strange that watching speed in movies, excites Semenya. When she is on the athletics track, it is all about speed 🏃

Since going to press, Caster won the gold medal at the World Championships in Berlin.