

Get the right people for job

Too few medals is the symptom of a lack of long-term planning

THE IAAF World Championships drew to a close last night, with South Africa registering a single bronze medal from Johan Cronje in the men's 1 500m.

We have in the past failed to win medals at the World Championships, but the scarcity of SA athletes in finals and the lack of emerging talent reinforces a deepening feeling that SA athletics is fighting against the very real threat of becoming obscure and irrelevant on the global stage.

In football, Bafana Bafana's victory against Burkina Faso notwithstanding, we languish outside Africa's top 10, alternating relief at occasional victory with frustration at regular disappointing defeat.

This is undoubtedly an underachievement given our relative resource-wealth. Most sports, particularly the Olympic codes, fight the same battles, which culminate every second year in Olympic or Commonwealth Games under-performance and resultant inquisitions.

To those searching for solutions to these current sporting under-performances, I would stress that the answer will not be found in current practices.

That is, the explanation for our

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2013 World Championship failures will not be found in anything that was or was not done in 2013, or even 2012.

Rather, it is a problem perhaps a decade in the making. That's because, just as there is no such thing as instant, "overnight" success, there is no instant failure. Successful sporting nations succeed because they create pipelines for sporting achievement, combining the search for talent with the application of clever and disciplined training and support, to produce world-class athletes.

I believe that the search for talent and sporting excellence can be distilled into a simple concept and questions: "At the 2024 Olympics, in eleven years, a South African athlete wins a gold medal. That athlete is between 10 and 15 years old today.



TOUGH GOING: Sunette Viljoen finished outside the medals in 6th place at the World Championships in Moscow. Picture: DOMINIC EBENBICHLER/REUTERS

Where is he, what is he doing, and who is doing it with him?"

The problem for SA sport, and this has been the case for over a decade, is that we cannot answer those questions. The mismanagement of athletics began over a decade ago, culminating in the 2009 Chuene-Semenya debacle and subsequent mutinies and power struggles. All the while, we were unable to provide any support in the form

of identification, competition, coaching or scientific support to promising teenage athletes.

In 2013, they paid the price for the failures of others when they were fifteen years old, yet we are surprised and become frustrated when we are bereft of world-class adult champions.

The solution to this is not complex. Albert Einstein, perhaps not known for sporting insight, pro-

vides a start point: "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it."

In other words, today's failures will not be solved unless we change our thinking, and thus the actions that create them. Continuing to do the same things, with the same people, will only repeat the cycle.

The solution is people, not money. Of course, some money is needed to get the best people involved, but it is by itself not the answer.

Kenya and Jamaica, both under-resourced, illustrate this when they win around 10 medals at every major athletics championships.

The richness of their gene pool has catalysed the growth of expertise in distance running and sprinting.

Recently, I was invited to contribute to a talent symposium and strategy meeting in London, and it struck me that the single most impressive factor that explains their current sporting success is the collective intelligence of their people.

This is a topic worthy of more detail in future, but the sporting IQ of everyone from the manager and administrator to the coach and journalist, is staggering.

It is this hard-earned sporting intellectual capital, with the right people asking the right questions, that drives excellence. It's this to which we must aspire, and then, perhaps in three generations, we'll have turned our fortunes around.

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