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Caster Semenya celebrated as a South African icon

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Caster Semenya (Pic: Gary van Wyk)

Caster Semenya, the South African LGBTI star athlete, will be featured in the acclaimed short-film television series 21 ICONS.

The profiles trace South Africa's history, moving from the fight for freedom to the country's growth during democracy, and concluding with a vision of the future. This third season has been envisaged as a tribute to the country's future, shedding the spotlight on young South African icons.

The 24-year-old middle-distance runner and world champion was selected for the series "as an individual whose life serves as an inspirational example to others to

never give up and pursue your dreams despite hardships."

Born in Polokwane in 1991, Semenya was raised in the village of Fairlie, deep in northern Limpopo. Growing up with three sisters and a brother, she was a tomboy as a young child. She attended Nthema Secondary School and began training as a runner when she took up soccer as a sport.

On her selection as an icon Semenya commented: "I love running. I feel free and I can just be myself." She added, "I would watch the Olympics and the All Africa Games and see my role models running. I had that feeling that maybe I could be like them or better."

Following her victory at the 2009 World Championships, it was announced amidst great controversy that Semenya had been subjected to gender testing.

In an intimate conversation with filmmaker and photographer Gary van Wyk, she said: "I'm just a human being. I don't control things. I run because I love running. If I'm taken away from it that doesn't change me or mean I will stop running. I'm not doing it for anyone else."

The International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF) released a statement that it was "obliged to investigate" after she made improvements of 25 seconds at 1500m and eight seconds at 800m – "the sort of dramatic breakthroughs that usually arouse suspicion of drug use."

The IAAF also asked Semenya to undergo a gender test after the win. However, a leak of confidentiality led to some insensitive reactions from critics.

She commented, "They think they'll shut me down – if you couldn't shut me down before, what makes you think you'll shut me down now?"

Semenya was withdrawn from international competition until 6 July 2010, when the IAAF cleared her to return. She was later chosen to carry the South African flag during the opening ceremony of the 2012 Summer Olympics.

She went on to win silver medals at the 2011 World Championships and the 2012 Summer Olympics, both in the 800 metres. And, pending the outcome of a doping investigation, Semenya might be receiving Olympic gold after all.

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In 2010, the British magazine New Statesman included Semenya in a list of '50 People That Matter 2010' for unintentionally instigating "an international and often ill-tempered debate on gender politics, feminism, and race, becoming an inspiration to gender campaigners around the world."

She told Van Wyk: "It's life, man. There are barriers and stumbling blocks – you can't expect it to be perfect. Even if there are challenges, you have to find a way to overcome them."

During a portrait sitting for 21 ICONS, she recalled a conversation she had with Madiba: "Nelson Mandela told me that I must just believe in myself. Where there is hope, there is belief. He told me to just keep doing what I am doing – I'm the best at what I do, nobody can change that."

Semenya founded the Caster Semenya Foundation through which she trains and assists young athletes. "I know what it takes to be a world champion so I just want to give young kids an opportunity to taste what I have tasted. That's what I want in my heart."

On the future of South Africa she said: "We need to be educated to be better leaders and better people. We need to be educated to become what Nelson Mandela dreamed of – to be united as a country."

Last month it was reported that **Semenya had married her long-time girlfriend**, fellow runner Violet Raseboya, in a ceremony in Ga-Dikgale, Limpopo. The athlete, has, however, remained intensely private about her personal life and has not explicitly addressed her sexuality.

Watch Semenya's profile on 17 January on SABC 3 at 19h27. The episode will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel.

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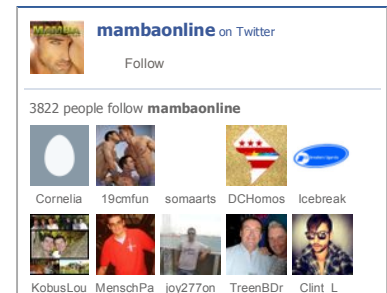
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