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By *TMG Team* on 14 January, 2016

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"You can't wait for someone to push you – you have to know your game. I think that's what made me survive."



On 17 January 2016 on SABC 3 at 19h27, the acclaimed short-film series 21 ICONS will feature the 17th icon of its third season: 24-year-old middle-distance runner and world champion, Caster Semenya. The episode will repeat the next day at 17h57 on the same channel.

21 ICONS traces South Africa's history over the course of its three seasons, moving from the fight for freedom to the country's growth during democracy, and concluding with a vision of the future. This season has been envisaged as a tribute to the country's future, shedding the spotlight on young South African icons.

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For this reason, young South African talent Gary van Wyk (34) has stepped up as principal photographer for the third season. Adrian Steirn, who conceived the project, continues his involvement as one of the photographers capturing the behind-the-scenes images.

Semenya has been selected for 21 ICONS South Africa Season III as an individual whose life serves as an inspirational example to others to never give up and pursue your dreams despite hardships. She strives to serve her community through her sports foundation and setting an example of living positively.

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."

Born in Polokwane in 1991, she was raised in the village of Fairlie, deep in northern Limpopo. Growing up with three sisters and a brother, Semenya 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 comments, "I love running. I feel free and I can just be myself." She adds, "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."

In July 2008, at the age of 17, Semenya participated in the 2008 World Junior Championships, and won the gold in the 800m at the 2008 Commonwealth Youth Games with a time of 2:04.23.

In a conversation with Van Wyk she says, "They said I wasn't ready to run and I asked them, 'Says who?' You can't tell me I'm not ready. I told the coach, 'Go tell these people I am going to run.'"

She continues, "At 17 I first won the Commonwealth Youth Games, and it was one of the best moments. I never thought I'd beat my competitors easily and I did it on my own without anyone's guidance."

In 2009, Semenya took part in the African Junior Championships where she won both the 800m and the 1500m races with the times of 1:56.72 and 4:08.01 respectively.

In that race, Semenya improved her 800m personal best by seven seconds in less than 9 months, including four seconds in that race alone. The 800m time was the world leading time at that date and it was both a national and a championship record.

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

She tells Van Wyk, "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 comments, "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 and nine days later she won two minor races in Finland.

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."

In an intimate conversation with Van Wyk, she says, "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 she recalls 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 was finally cleared to return to international competition and was chosen to carry the South African flag during the opening ceremony of the 2012 Summer Olympics.



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She won silver medals at the 2011 World Championships and the 2012 Summer Olympics, both in the 800 metres. Pending the outcome of a doping investigation, Semenya might be receiving Olympic gold after all

For the portrait 'We Need Spirit' which will appear digitally on the Monday after her short-film is released, Van Wyk describes the visual elements, "Set against a black backdrop, Semenya is photographed with her arms outstretched, knees bent and face toward the sky. Dressed in all black, her posture is a re-imagining of her beating the odds and crossing the finish line. The resulting image is one that imagines her in her element – triumphant and dignified."

On the future of South Africa she says, "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."

She concludes by saying, "It's great to be a South African – I love it. I'm blessed to be a part of it. And now I am a part of our history."



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