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people by: Kate Ferreira · 22 January 2016

## 21 Icons celebrates Caster Semenya

Athlete Caster Semenya is gearing up for Rio 2016, and her 21 Icons portrait might just be a premonition of her success.

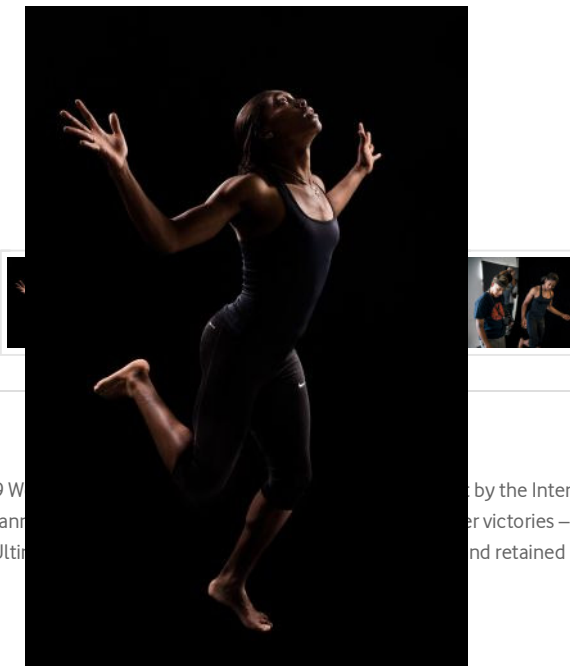
Middle distance runner Caster Semenya is the subject of the latest 21 Icons portrait, released this week.

Today, the 24-year-old who grew up in Fairlie, Limpopo, is a well-known figure locally and internationally, but the support and respect she earned as an athlete was marred by controversy early in her career – over spurious accusations of doping and lurid media speculation about her gender. It is not the celebration of her achievements she deserved.

Given this rough introduction to fame, you might expect Caster to be angry or bitter. Instead, through the short film, interview and the resulting portrait, it is clear that Caster is stronger than the rumours and negativity thrown her way. She is also a single-minded athlete, someone who, as the 21 Icons statement says, 'serves as an inspirational example to others to never give up and pursue your dreams despite hardships'.

### Going the distance

Speaking to photographer Gary van Wyk, Caster is remarkably down-to-earth. She talks about being recognised the world over and her career without a hint of ego, despite her achievements. At just 17, Caster took gold in the 800m race at the 2008 Commonwealth Youth Games. The following year, she won the 800m and 1 500m races at the African Junior Championships, setting national and international records for her times.



She also won gold at the 2009 World Championships by the International Association of Athletic Federations (IAAF) and was later investigated for gender and possible doping. Ultimately, she was cleared and retained her medal.

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### Courageous and ambitious

Her pragmatism is evident when she tells 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.'

And she did – returning to competition, winning medals in 2011 and 2012, and carrying the flag for her country at the 2012 summer Olympics. She is now training for the Olympics in Rio this year. She also runs the Caster Semenya Foundation, a training based organisation for young athletes.

### A fitting portrait

'We Need Spirit', as the portrait is titled, is a very fitting tribute. In it Caster holds a triumphant pose, a sprinter crossing the finish line. And the arresting image is inherently joyful; Her gaze firmly upward, her fingers splayed wide, Caster looks like she's dancing. 'I run because I love running,' she says. '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.'

### About 21 Icons

21 Icons is a photographic and short film project focused on our national icons and leaders, and inspired by the life of Nelson Mandela. The first two seasons featured South African leaders from the struggle against apartheid and the early years of our new democracy. The third season icons are all under the age of 35, and were selected for their positive influence on the direction of our young nation. Find out more by following [21 Icons on Twitter](#).

For more coverage, check out our stories on the third season so far:

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