

A 21 ICONS SA PROFILE

Zanele Situ

"I try everything. I believe I can do whatever someone else can – and so I like to help people, especially people with disabilities – to help people to get out there."

21 Icons SA recently celebrated the 18th icon of its second season: Zanele Situ, a Paralympic athlete who is an inspiration to all South Africans.

She conquered setbacks and adversity to become the first black South African athlete to win a Paralympic gold medal.

In an intimate conversation, Situ talks about her life as a Paralympic athlete. Born in Matatiele, Eastern Cape, in 1971, she became paralysed in 1982 at the age of 12 after contracting a TB infection.

"One Sunday evening, I was having a bath and I was overcome with tiredness. This was the start of my illness," she says.

Situ was bedridden in a hospital for three years, but she says her spirit was never low because she still had an active mind.

At the Ikhwezi Lokusa Special School in Matatiele, she was encouraged to try her hand at field events and quickly found she excelled in javelin, discus and shot put.

With an incredible attitude, Situ never felt limited by being confined to a wheelchair and was very active, playing rugby and basketball, and participating in life by doing chores, shopping and cleaning the house.

Situ was determined not to be held back by the challenges posed by her disability and she took up athletics in 1985, and turned professional three years later.

In 1996, Zanele qualified for the World Championships in England where

she won two gold medals for javelin and shot-put. At the 2000 Paralympic Games in Sydney, Australia, she broke the world record for javelin and again took the gold. In fact, she won the javelin event with a world record throw that bettered the previous mark by an unprecedented three metres. Zanele followed up that achievement with a silver medal in the discus event. In France in 2002 she once again broke the javelin world record at the World Championships.

"I can't really say why, but I fell in love with javelin and the more I improved, the more dedicated and committed I became," she says.

Situ says she was intimidated by the 50 000-strong crowd at Stadium Australia and wanted to throw in the towel. "I just wanted to go home. But once I had my first throw and saw that it went over the yellow line for the world record, I felt much better."

Competing in a category for athletes with spinal injuries, Situ won the javelin event with a world record throw that bettered the previous mark by an unprecedented 3 metres. Situ followed up that achievement with a silver medal in the discus event.

She was a recipient of the National Order of Ikhamanga for Outstanding Achievement in 2003, which was awarded by former president Thabo Mbeki.

Situ says there is no reason to avoid participating in sport just because you are disabled.

"My weapons for obtaining discus silver and other trophies are praying, hard work, focus and passion."

Situ is a fine example of the human spirit's ability to overcome adversity and become a hero.

