

Caster Semenya

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



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On 17 January 2016 the acclaimed short-film series *21 ICONS* featured the 17th icon of its third season: 24-year-old middle-distance runner and world champion, Caster Semenya.

Semenya has been selected for *21 ICONS* South Africa Season 3 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 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.

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.

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.

About the portrait

For the portrait '*We Need Spirit*', Gary 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."

View the video

About 21 Icons Season 3

The short film-series documents the conversations between Gary Van Wyk as the photographer and filmmaker and the icons. Each short film provides insight into both the subject and photographer's creative approach to the portrait.

Behind each portrait lies a carefully planned concept that captures not only the essence of each icon visually, but also in spirit and in terms of their unique legacy.

Season three of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa.

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