

Following is the complete, unabridged version of Tito Morales' feature on Ryk Neethling and Roland Schoeman that appeared in the October issue of Swimming World Magazine. If you'd like to see photos, check out the October magazine.

NEETHLING AND SCHOEMAN: REDRAWING THE GLOBAL SWIMMING MAP

By Tito Morales

As Ryk Neethling climbed atop the starting block on the evening of Aug. 15, 2004, he was surrounded by the type of maelstrom only the finals of an Olympic swimming relay race can generate.

The pool deck was littered with spent competitors struggling to regain enough breath to rally on their teammates. Race officials scampered about scrutinizing exchanges. And, up in the stands that swept high into the warm Athens night, thousands of spectators cupped palms over their mouths to create the loudest possible whistles and cheers.

The South African 4 x 100 meter freestyle relay team was on the brink of history.

Roland Schoeman had floored the competition with a blistering opening leg of 48.17. Lyndon Ferns had backed that up with a stunning 48.13. And now, as the veteran Neethling watched young Darian Townsend empty his courage between the lanes, he understood that this, at long last, was their moment. Olympic gold dangled just two short lengths away.

"We knew it was going to be a tough race, but we thought we had a good chance," recalls Neethling. "To be honest, we would have been over the moon if we finished third."

But this race was destined to be more than a lunar shot for the country of South Africa. Schoeman, Neethling and company were reaching all the way to the stars, and they were close enough to feel their heat....

A FAST TRACK TO GREATNESS

A latecomer to the sport, Schoeman, 24, didn't seriously pursue competitive swimming until he was a teenager. His youth revolved around cricket and rugby, more traditional South African pursuits. In the beginning, he couldn't even stand swimming.

"The more I have thought about it, the more I am convinced that swimming chose me and not the other way around," Schoeman explains.

Watching his first Olympic Games in 1996, Schoeman, a natural sprinter, was struck by the great Alexander Popov.

"He was the only swimmer I ever really idolized," he says. "His calm demeanor and his ability to win were all aspects that I wanted to have."

Understanding that becoming one of the best swimmers in the world would require broadening his horizons, Schoeman enrolled at the University of Arizona in 1999. Fellow countryman Neethling was already living and training in Tucson.

It was there in the desert, under the tutelage of coaches Frank Busch and Rick DeMont, that Schoeman began to hone his natural skills in dramatic fashion.

At his first NCAA Championships, Schoeman finished third in the 50 yard freestyle, 19.49, and second in the 100 yard freestyle, 42.88. Things only continued to improve from there.

By the time Athens rolled around, in fact, Schoeman had firmly established himself as one of the favorites in both the 50 and 100 meter freestyle events. His best time in the former, 21.98, had catapulted him to being the sixth fastest performer in history. And his PR in the latter, 48.20, had earned him a second-place seeding heading into the Games.

In Greece, Schoeman delivered—and delivered Big Time. In addition to his leading role in the relay, he earned a silver medal in the 50 meter free and a bronze in the 100 meter free.

"The last few years have been very trying and filled with failures, but I was able to learn from those failures," Schoeman says. "To come away with three Olympic medals in a single Games is a dream come true."

Because of his brilliant performance, the young man who used to have an aversion to pools was named South Africa's 2004 Sportsman of the Year.

THE PIECES COME TOGETHER

It's difficult to imagine what must have been going through the South African relay members' heads during the afternoon of Aug. 15.

Before Athens, they'd crunched the numbers and realized that they had a definite shot at a medal. They knew they could improve upon their best time—the 3:18.79 recorded during an eighth-place finish at the World Championships the summer before. It would have to be improved upon if they had any interest in even getting close to the podium.

For both Schoeman and Neethling, the realization that they were on the cusp of greatness hit home when countryman Ferns knocked off a 48.99 on Dec. 6, 2003 at the Texas Invitational. Five months later, Townsend cracked the 50-second barrier. Suddenly all the pieces were starting to mesh.

"It was all a matter of putting it together on the day," says Schoeman.

Three days before the race, Neethling made an important decision. He would scratch from the heats of the 200 meter freestyle, scheduled on the same day of the relay, to focus entirely on helping the foursome to advance through to the finals.

"We had a time-trial and decided that it was important for us to make sure that we made the finals first," Neethling explains, acknowledging that the 200 would have been one of his best opportunities to finally earn that elusive individual Olympic medal.

Unlike every other country that was expected to contend in the relay event, the South Africans would attack the morning preliminaries with their "A" team. They would leave absolutely nothing to chance.

In the prelims, they blasted their way to an African record 3:13.84, just 17-hundredths of a second behind Australia's world record. It was the second fastest relay ever swum.

If onlookers possessed any lingering doubts about the team's potential to wreck havoc against the traditional swimming powers later that evening, they were either suffering from the effects of excessive sun exposure or were operating in a bottomless pit of denial.

AN AMAZING METAMORPHOSIS

Neethling, 27, is the consummate modern-day swimmer. After a successful career at Arizona, during which he captured nine individual NCAA championships for the Wildcats, he made a tidy segue into the professional ranks.

His focus in the early days was on distance, and purely distance. At the 1996 Olympic Games, he placed fifth in the 1500 meter free with the time of 15:14.63. During the next four years, he continued to pound out the yardage, and further established himself as one of the most talented milers in the world. His personal best, 15:00.48, recorded in the finals at Sydney, places him in a small collection of history's fastest performers.

But Neethling wanted more. After traveling to Australia with high hopes in the 1500 and coming away with a disappointing fifth place, he decided to shift his focus entirely.

"After Sydney, I just thought that 15:00 was as fast as Ryk Neethling was ever going to go in the 1500," he explains. "I wanted a new challenge."

He would set aside his long distance aspirations, and instead turn his attention into becoming a sprint specialist.

Fortunately for Neethling, he was in the perfect environment to make such a transformation possible. DeMont, one of his coaches, had

himself made the exact same switch to sprinting at the end of his illustrious distance career.

This is not to suggest that Neethling had to learn the art of sprinting from scratch. Even at the height of his long distance prowess, he was the South African national record holder in the 100 with a time of 49.7. But in order to truly make the grade, he knew he would have to swim much faster.

"In the beginning, I wasn't so successful, and some people felt sorry for me," recalls Neethling.

Gradually, though, it all began to come together. In the four years between Sydney and Athens, Neethling had managed to whittle his PR down to a 48.76. Now, suddenly, he was a force on the international level.

So it came as no surprise in Athens, really, that when a relay gold was on the line, not only did Neethling defend the generous lead his teammates had provided him, but he ended up producing the third fastest split in the entire pool, 47.91.

Individually at Athens, Ryk finished fourth in the 100 with a time of 48.63. In the year since, he's lowered that time to 48.34, fast enough for a bronze medal at Worlds, where he also placed third in the 200 free (1:46.63).

HELPING TO ERASE 30 YEARS OF HEARTACHE

In hindsight, it wasn't so much that the South African relay victory was such a shock. The truly stunning part was the ease with which they pulled it off.

"I think our triumph astounded many, but I think the fact that we won by such a large margin over the world's superpowers is what really set the moment apart," says Schoeman.

From Schoeman to Ferns to Townsend to Neethling, the entire performance was nothing less than dominating. Their 3:13.17 not only shattered the world record, but it also set up the country's dynamic sprinting corps as something that would have to be contended with for many years to come.

Quite simply, the "Awesome Foursome," as they've come to be known in their homeland, has emphatically redrawn the global swimming map.

To be sure, though, South African swimming did not simply fall out of the sky with the men's 4 x 100 relay. Prior to 2004, the women's side had produced Olympic medals by Jenny Maakal in 1932, Joan Harrison in 1952, Marianne Kriel in 1996, and, of course, the wondrous Penny Heyns who earned two golds and a bronze in the 1996 and 2000 Games.

But the men's side was a completely different story. Until Athens, Terrence Parkin's silver medal in Sydney was the lone top-three finish in Olympic Games history.

Despite this, there's no question that South Africa has had a long and memorable history in the sport. Their success may not be reflected in the record books—because the country was banned from participating in the Games from 1960 until 1992 due to its appalling policy of apartheid—but it is indisputable, nonetheless.

For far too many years, South African athletes, both black and white, were reduced to competing strictly amongst themselves. Even despite such handicaps, though, the country still continued to produce world-class athletes in the pool. In the middle to latter part of the 1960s, for instance, Karen Muir broke 15 different world records in backstroke events. In 1976, sprinting superstar Jonty Skinner broke the world record in the 100 meter freestyle. And, 12 years later, Peter Williams turned the trick in the 50 meter free.

"When I first started dreaming about the Olympics, we were banned completely," says Neethling. "My parents were prepared to move to another country in order for me to reach my dream. We've had to go through a lot of hardship that swimmers from the United States, Canada or Australia will never know about."

FRIENDS, TEAMMATES AND RIVALS

To the casual observer, it may almost seem as if Neethling and Schoeman are joined at the hip. Both made names for themselves at home before traveling abroad; both wound up studying and training at the University of Arizona; both have developed into premier sprinters; both take tremendous pride in their South African heritage; and both have recently signed lucrative deals with swimwear manufacturer Arena.

None of this should imply, however, that there is not a very real competitive component to their relationship.

When not part of a national relay, they are both striving to become the fastest swimmer—singular—in the world. When they're both training at the same facility, Neethling and Schoeman spend long, hard hours bashing at one another in the water.

During the short course meters FINA World Cup tour held earlier this year, they hammered at one another in one bang-bang short course meters race after another—from city to city, and from continent to continent. The unspoken challenge to themselves—and each other—was to elevate the level of their swimming.

They succeeded.

On Jan. 18, for instance, Schoeman blasted to a world record in the 100 meter individual medley with his 52.51 in Stockholm. Four

days later, Neethling snatched it away by posting a 52.11 in Berlin. Not to be outdone, Schoeman, in the same pool, raced to the world record in the 100 meter freestyle. Several days later, in Moscow, Neethling again attacked the 100 IM and lowered his world record still further.

By the time the dust had finally settled at the end of the physically and emotionally draining transcontinental circuit, Neethling, with 21 total victories and the fastest individual performance on FINA's scoring chart, had earned the World Cup's top honors. Schoeman, though, was just a shade behind in second place.

"My rivalry with Roland is more intense than ever," says Neethling. "But I think we both know that it's for the best."

ALTERING A CONTINENT'S CONSCIOUSNESS

Americans often take their Olympic swimming team's success for granted. It's considered a given, for instance, that each quadrennial the U.S. will earn the competition's most overall medals. In fact, it's rarely been a case of whether or not Team USA will dominate an Olympic competition, but rather to which degree it will do so.

For aficionados in the U.S., then, it is next to impossible to appreciate fully the tremendous impact of the South African relay team's triumph back in their homeland.

Even the excitement generated by the U.S. hockey team in Lake Placid in 1980 surely pales in comparison.

Olympic medals simply do not rain down upon the vast majority of the world's national swim teams as they do in the United States. The seven total medals that South Africa had accumulated prior to Athens, for example, is something Americans have grown accustomed to seeing our most talented athletes attempting to collect in a single competition.

But, oh, how one race can change things...

"It's put it (competitive swimming) on a whole new level," says Neethling of the relay. "The average South African knows what splits we did."

"The period before the race, and just after the race, I felt like this was something that I had helped three other guys achieve," reflects Schoeman. "But standing on the podium, I knew that it wasn't just for those three guys. It was for a whole nation."

In a populace accustomed to reading almost exclusively about rugby, cricket and soccer, there is suddenly a whole new set of heroes to worship. Little boys can now fantasize about becoming Olympic swimming champions and know, because of what transpired in Athens, that their dreams can come true.

"The glory and excitement we felt was being experienced by every other South African," says Schoeman. "It was a moment that will forever be engraved in my mind and in the minds of all South Africans."

For Neethling and Schoeman, though, the work has only just begun. Not only are they intent on continuing to raise the profile of competitive swimming in their country, but also in the continent as a whole.

"Africa is at a stage where it is looking to play a far more significant role on all levels in world affairs," says Schoeman. "The swimming victory showed that initiatives from the African continent have the opportunity to equal—and even better—what happens in the rest of the world."

Tito Morales, a Masters swimmer who competed collegiately for the University of California at Berkeley, is a novelist and free-lance writer based in Southern California.