

# A gold for Africa

Nawal El Moutawakel sets the pace for African sportswomen. *Cheryl Roberts* met up with her

**T**en years ago, Nawal El Moutawakel of Morocco made history by becoming the first African woman ever to win an Olympic gold medal.

She won the medal for coming first in the 400m hurdles at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. She was 21 years old at the time.

"Before we left for Los Angeles, I knew that no other African woman had ever won an Olympic gold medal," says El Moutawakel. "I desperately wanted to do something for my country and for Africa. But I knew there was going to be a lot of competition and that anything could happen in the race.

"Our king hosted a farewell party for us. He said he wanted the men and women to bring home gold medals for Morocco. I looked around and realised that this had to be me, as I was Morocco's only woman athlete. So the pressure was really on me," she says.

She was ranked number eight in the world, certainly not a favourite to win the gold medal. But she knew she could surprise a lot of people.

El Moutawakel took up the

challenge, never gave up hope throughout the race and went on to win the 400m hurdles. This was the first time women had run the event at the Olympic Games.

Winning a gold medal was not just a victory for herself, but for all African women.

The Moroccan says she owes her success to her late father, who encouraged her to take up athletics at an early age.

"He used to take me running on the beach with my brothers when I was a child," she says. When she was 15, the Moroccan Athletics Federation spotted her and, two years later, she was included in the national team. Because of a lack of competition at home, she moved overseas.

"The coach said I had the talent to become an international athlete," remembers El Moutawakel.

Her family supported her and, through hard work and a tough training programme, she prepared herself for the ultimate challenge, the Los Angeles Olympics.

*The death of her father and her university teammates in a*



plane crash after the Olympics, made it difficult for El Moutawakel to concentrate on her running. Three years after her Olympic triumph, she decided she had had enough of international athletics.

**"W**hen I lined up at the start of the 400m hurdles event at the 1987 World Athletics Championship, I did not feel right. As the starter signalled for us to begin the race, my legs failed to move. I stood in my starters block and just could not run. I knew that I had lost the feeling to run.

"So I quit and returned home, confident that I had made the right decision."

When an athlete wins an Olympic Gold, she becomes the pride of the nation. El Moutawakel became a national

Photo: Associated Press



**Moroccan Nawal El Moutawakel at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics where she became the first woman from Africa to ever win an Olympic Gold medal**

● The Ancient Greeks first started the Olympic Games in honour of the Greek god, Zeus. The first Olympiad (Olympic Games) ever written about was held 776 years before Christ, in the Ancient Greek city of Olympia. Only men took part and only men watched. The ancient games were held every four years for 1500 years before they stopped.

The Olympic Games started up again in 1896 in Athens, Greece. Since then the

Olympics have been held every four years — except in 1940 and 1944 because of the Second World War. More and more countries have taken part in each Olympic Games.

In 1964, South Africa was thrown out of the Olympics because of its apartheid policies. South Africa returned to the Olympics, which were held in Barcelona in 1992. The next Olympic Games will take place in 1996 in Melbourne, Australia.

hero. But this put so much pressure on her to remain the best in the world. She could not cope.

A mother of two young children, El Moutawakel (31) is now assistant technical director of the Moroccan Athletics Federation. She is disappointed that no Moroccan woman has won a gold medal after her. She is doing all she can to encourage women to take athletics seriously.

She has already succeeded in bringing back retired women athletes. This, she says, has proved very helpful, especially for younger athletes who need role models.

**A**bout Africa's athletics future, she says: "I think we have a very good future ahead of us. We have the talent to make us the top sports continent. All we have to do is

make it happen."

El Moutawakel has shown that African women, like their male counterparts, have the talent to compete and reach the highest levels.

Ten years after her victory in Los Angeles, El Moutawakel remains a role model for millions of African women and girls who participate in sport against all odds. ♀