

Women on the right track

Athletics is becoming increasingly popular in South Africa. But men steal most of the limelight while women remain in the shadows. Cheryl Roberts looks at why so few black women take part in athletics



Photos: Julian Drew

Blanche Moila, one of the pioneers

The African continent has produced many outstanding women athletes who have gone on to become world Olympics champions. There's Ethiopia's Derartu Tulu, Hassiba Boulmerka of Algeria and Maria Moutula of Mozambique. But it hasn't always been like this.

For decades, only African men competed in international sports events. Many people believed that African women do not play sport at all.

In the 1990s, African women's participation in sport began to increase. At the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, Derartu Tulu and Hassiba Boulmerka won gold medals and South Africa's Elana Meyer won a silver medal.

Athletics is one of South Africa's biggest sports. Road running is very popular among black men, and they dominate championship victories.

Today, more and more black women are taking part in athletics, particularly road running, and are also coming up as champions.

Lydia Mofula of Sebokeng became the first black woman to win national colours when she represented South Africa in a road relay in Japan last year. Mofula said the woman who gave her inspiration was well-known Durban athlete Blanche Moila.

"I used to see Blanche Moila on TV and in magazines. I thought, if she can do it then so can I," she said.

But Mofula, like many other black women athletes, had to battle to get companies to sponsor her.

"Many athletes who I beat regularly get free shoes, and even though I've been running well for many years, no one offered to help me," she said.

For years Blanche Moila

was the only black woman runner in the country. Her participation, with successful results, has served as an inspiration to many women. She told SPEAK how she became a runner. "I was never into athletics. While doing my nursing training, a doctor friend asked me to take part in race. I really enjoyed the race and didn't do too badly. I started running competitively and, in 1982, was awarded Natal cross country colours," said Moila.

She went on to win junior Springbok colours in 1983 and, in 1984, was awarded full Springbok colours. For many years, Moila held all the long distance titles in Natal. She has also represented South Africa in other countries.

Moila hasn't given up her love for running. "I'm always keen to see how long I can go



Louisa Leballo winning the women's race at the Soweto 10 km Fun Run – January 1993

and to improve my time. It motivates me.”

She said women do not take part in sport because of customs and traditions. “Men do not want women to run because they believe women



Lydia Mofula running for South Africa at the 1993 World Cross Country Championships in Spain

have to be in the kitchen. Some people even believe that you will not be able to have children if you exercise a lot. This is not true,” added Moila.

How can such ideas be challenged? “We should begin at school. Children must be told it is okay for girls to take part in sport. We also need to hold seminars about women in sport so women can gain the confidence to go out there and take part in any sport they want to.”

Winning has never been the most important thing for Moila: “Anybody can be a runner. You don't have to win to be a winner, it's achieving your goal that is important.”

Louisa Leballo is still at school. She is already a junior international and has participated in events in Spain and Germany. She is considered as one of South Africa's best hopes for international honours in the year 2000 and beyond.

For the several black women who are competitive athletes it has not been easy. Three main factors affect women's participation:

- Cultural traditions,
- The apartheid system, which provided no facilities in the townships and rural areas, and
- Patriarchy, which means women have to face the double burden of working and taking care of their families. Because of this, women have no time for sport and leisure.

Leaders of sport agree that black women face much discrimination. If black sportswomen are to realise their potential, they will need assistance on all levels. It is important that they alone don't bear the brunt of domestic responsibilities. Sponsors, too, must realise that by deliberately ignoring black women's participation in sport they are actively contributing to the gender and racial imbalance.

Because of apartheid and very little or no opportunities, black women are yet to make their mark in international sport.

South Africa has a pool of talent among black women, but much assistance and co-operation is needed to release this talent and make South Africa a proud sporting nation. ★