

SA could learn from Jamaicans

JAMAICA'S National High School Track and Field Championships, known to locals simply as "Champs", is an event that, understandably, barely registers a blip on the Richter Scale of most South Africans. But for those involved in track and field, it's a seismic event.

For it is at this five-day sports event that 40 000 wildly enthusiastic spectators cram into a 35 000-seater stadium to get a first glimpse of their future Olympic champions.

"Champs" is Jamaica's largest sports event by some distance, and is one of the primary vehicles through which this relatively tiny island has delivered the sprinting dominance most of us recognise in Usain Bolt, Yohan Blake and Shelly-Ann Fraser-Pryce.

The relevance of "Champs" for those outside athletics is that it demonstrates the three key requirements for elite athlete development. They are: aspiration or imitation; selection; and viability. It is these three boxes that must be ticked in order to produce world-class sporting talent. Where nations or teams have failed, it is because one or more of these boxes has not been checked.

Aspiration is what binds

“Doing it for the love of the game is not a realistic ideal

Indian cricket, South African rugby, Spanish clay court tennis and Jamaican sprinting. It is that intangible quality that allows children to see, rather than imagine, what is possible and compels them to pursue the training required to get there. When Usain Bolt or Asafa Powell attend the finals of the 100m races at "Champs" to hand over the medals, they make a lasting contribution to the desire of those athletes to persist and succeed.

Children are masterful imitators and so, provided there is access to those role models (usually TV for widest impact), there is scope to develop the next Tendulkar or Nadal.

Selection is box number two. It makes no elite-performance sense for thousands of children to play a sport if there is no way to identify and select them into teams, where those who are

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best-endowed and most-skilled can excel. Competitive systems like the Jamaican school championships provide exposure to competition, and the sport's equivalent of "survival of the fittest" drives the progressive emergence of the very best.

This selection and competition process is one of South Africa's great rugby advantages. Driven by competitive schools, and funnelled through Craven Weeks, we benefit enormously from the constant competition that ultimately reveals the top 50 players who will go on to earn professional contracts and enter the Springbok selection pool each year. SA football, on the other hand, lacks this advantage.

The final box is viability. If a nation is asking an athlete to pursue a career in a sport, then it has to make that career choice viable. As much as we want to do it for the love of the game, this is not a realistic ideal when the rest of the world has professional sport. An 18-year-old stands at the crossroads of his or her life and, in one direction, lies future study and a possible career as a dentist, lawyer, accountant.

If we want them to go in the other direction then we must provide support that at least ensures they are not liabilities to someone else (usually family). This rarely happens for sports other than cricket and rugby in SA and one shudders to think how many world-class athletes have aspired to achievement, been selected, and then fallen because "real life" gets in the way.

"Champs" may be a Jamaican affair but it's a great demonstration of the confluence of elite performance factors. These three factors are always delivered by people — the coaches, teachers and administrators — who facilitate the discovery of the next Usain Bolt, rather than stand in the way. Where glimmers of sporting success are stillborn, as happens so often in our Olympic sporting codes, look no further than "Champs" for the reasons.

Serena wins record title

SERENA Williams snapped out of her early doldrums to roar to a record seventh Miami title on Saturday with a 7-5 6-1 win against China's Li Na.

In a battle of the world's top two players, the US world No 1 took her tally of WTA titles to 59 — including 17 Grand Slam triumphs.

She added a second trophy in 2014 to the one she lifted in Brisbane in January and joined Martina Navratilova,

Steffi Graf and Chris Evert as the only women in the Open era to win the same title seven or more times.

Williams already owned the most WTA titles in the combined men's and women's event, but had shared the overall record of six with Andre Agassi.

"Obviously I wanted the most titles here," added Williams, who lives in Miami and first played the event as a 16-year-old. — AFP