

Medal machine Jepkosgei revs for Olympics

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NAIROBI, Kenya, April 4- Since she made her bow as a junior athlete at the inaugural World Youth Championships in 1999, Janeth Jepkosgei is credited with 14 medals at IAAF events, placing her head and shoulders above her female distance running compatriots.

Her ascendancy was primed to hit stellar heights following her commanding victory at the 2007 Worlds in Osaka but in a curious sequence of events, the thunder was sensationally stolen from under her feet.

First, the woman christened the ‘Eldoret Express’ for her commanding triumphs at the 2006 Commonwealth Games and Osaka a year later was among the cream of female two-lap exponents crushed under the might of teenage upstart Pamela Jelimo.

In 2009, South Africa’s Caster Semenya, another teen phenomenon emerged from the backwaters of the Africa Youth Championships to lead her to the tape at the Berlin Worlds.

Lightening struck thrice last year when Russia’s Mariya Saminova rose from obscurity to deny her a second world title and as the London Olympics beckons, the affable Jepkosgei is once again polishing her medal machine for another tilt at glory.

Of the trio, Jelimo’s knock-out blow in the 2008 season remains the most pronounced for Jepkosgei.

“That was the time I went to Valencia to sign the contract for women 800m to be in the Golden League jackpot. Pamela came up and I lost it. Sanya Richards, Jeremy Wariner and I signed for our races to be included in the programme and I expected to win,” she disclosed.

She was alluding to the defunct IAAF elite competition where winners of the six races in the circuit pocketed a Sh1m (Sh80m) jackpot and as a world champion and seemingly unstoppable, the women two-lap race was tailor made for her.

Jelimo however, soared to the bonanza on the back of an unbeaten sequence of 13 races that including sweeping the Osaka champion at the Beijing Olympics where she settled for silver.

“Even Mutola said she was something else. I imagined if Pamela would do for many years, then the competition would be tough but I believe she can be back and when she does, we have room for her,” she commented before Jelimo proved her right by making her grand return at the World Indoor Championships in Istanbul.

On Caster who again forced her to accept the bridesmaid medal in Berlin a year after the Jelimo blitz, Jepkosgei said the South African at least presented surmountable opposition.

“Caster runs a normal race and I’m ready to challenge her. She does not run the way Pamela did since she hangs among two or three people before going for the finish,” the athlete who brought an end to the reign of the retired Mozambique female two-lap legend Maria Mutola declared.

As for Daegu Worlds where she had to settle for bronze, Jepkosgei stressed, “I had an injury in Daegu and I felt it in the last 300m and I could not sprint for the gold. Samanova had a better kick on the day but 2011 was a good year for me.

“I was able to be in the podium again in Daegu, it was my great achievement, I did my best and I always say I need to do my best.”

The athlete who added African Championships silver in 2010 is looking forwards to another podium run at the London Olympics before switching to the longer 1500m that she has been dallying with in the past two seasons.

“I hope I will be able to wave all my five fingers since I have won medals in four major championships and right now my training has been okay and I’m hoping to be in the podium once more.”

“It depends on how the training goes, when you do not have any injury, anything is possible. Competition is competition, I do not care which medal but in real sense, I want to have the medal I do not have,” she stated as she dreams of landing the Olympics gold that eluded her in 2008.

“This year I will concentrate on 800m and also do the 1500m. Last year, I ran a 4:02 and I need time to learn the tactics in 1500m. It is opening another page in my career; you can do something for long and have no motivation and interest and that is why I want to change.”

The major question is whether the athletics fraternity can witness the 2007 version of Jepkosgei that steamrolled all comers as she won the world title in a world leading 1:56.04.

“I’m working on it this year. I’m hoping to get the motivation and have that energy I had in 2007.”

“I always keep my room open. Any challenges I’m ready for it. In Daegu, I tried to run strong in front and I think with training and what we are focusing with my coaching, anything can happen.”

No matter what happens in London, her status as the most medalled female track runner in her country’s history will remain intact as she enters her breathtaking 13th season at the top echelons of her sport.

“There is no secret; it’s hard work, discipline and doing my best every day. The best thing is having the right people with you, having the right coach, the right group and being able to plan your season well, knowing when to train and relax.”

Having reaped so much success in her trade, Jepkosgei is now mentoring the new generation of female two-lap runners led by the former World Youth champion, Cherono Koech and Daegu Worlds finalist, Eunice Sum.

“I look for the discipline and talent and once I get someone ready to do what is needed, we can train together. Like Eunice, she is improving and in future when I leave 800m, we will have someone to take over.”

“When I’m not running, I do charity work in school and I also organise a cross country in November in my area when schools have closed to tap new talent and we finished a school with Toby Tanser and we have 100 kids,” she added.

The daughter of a teacher explained why she had opted to invest in the development of learning.

“Education is something for the future. All of us cannot do well in athletics and the most important thing is for someone to have the knowledge.”

Knowing that her career is in its last embers, Jepkosgei is already casting an eye to life after athletics.

“For now, I’m not even thinking about retirement but I guess when its all over, I will take a break and after that, I always wanted to be a nurse and I want to be in touch of people and I think I will go back to school to learn how to do it.”

Although widely said to be engaged to her Italian coach Claudio Berardelli, the Olympics silver medallist is coy when it comes to discuss about wedding bells and establishing a family.

“We will talk about it after the Olympics. Maybe I will want to be in Moscow to take on the Russians at home during the World Championships in 1500m,” she expertly side-steps the query.

As part of the Rosa Associati Camp training group in Kaptagat, Jepkosgei was among the last people who saw the late Olympics marathon champion, Samuel Wanjiru alive some 20 hours before his demise.

"We are really accepting that Sammy is not with us anymore. We miss him and we hope we can have someone else who can replace him especially in Nyahururu," she rued as she choked back tears.