

intRODUCING: Words by Ian Kern-Martin
Photos by Reg Caldecott

LONDON CALLS WHEELING TENNIS STARS

THE SOUTH AFRICAN PARALYMPIC TENNIS TEAM ARE DONNING THEIR GREEN AND GOLD KIT AND ARE ABOUT TO HIT THE COURT SKIDDING AS THEY PROUDLY REPRESENT THEIR COUNTRY IN PURSUIT OF GLORY AT THE WORLD'S PREMIER SPORTING SPECTACLE. DO IT NOW gained some insight into the build up to the Paralympic Games, as well as the requirements for participants and demands placed on prospective Paralympians. ▶

THE DO IT NOW TEAM WISHES OUR TENNIS PARALYMPIAN STARS MUCH SUCCESS IN THEIR QUEST FOR PARALYMPIC GLORY AS THEY TAKE TO THE COURTS AT THE ELTON MANOR TENNIS CENTRE, IN LONDON, FOR THE PARALYMPIC TENNIS EVENT THAT IS TAKING PLACE FROM 1-8 SEPTEMBER 2012.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHOW YOUR SUPPORT FOR THE TEAM AND SEND THEM A MESSAGE, [CLICK HERE.](#)



SPORTS COMPANY
SOUTH AFRICA

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Kgothatso Montjane



MOVIN CHANG

FOUR TEAM MEMBERS WHO STAND TO HAVE THEIR LIFELONG AMBITION OF PARALYMPIC GLORY FULFILLED ARE KGOATHATSO MONTJANE, LUCAS SITHOLE, EVANS MARIPA AND SYDWELL MATHONSI, ALL OF WHOM PARTICIPATE IN EVENTS ON THE NEC WHEELCHAIR TENNIS TOUR FOR APPROXIMATELY 26 WEEKS A YEAR. ALL FOUR HAVE DEDICATED MUCH OF THEIR TIME TO A RIGOROUS SIX DAYS A WEEK TRAINING REGIME, UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF A PERSONAL FITNESS TRAINER AND PHYSIOTHERAPIST WHO HELP TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARE NOT ONLY IN PEAK PHYSICAL CONDITION, BUT ALSO REMAIN FREE FROM INJURY.

Qualification for the Games was no mean feat. To qualify for the Open section of the Games, male players had to be ranked 54 or above and female players had to have achieved a ranking of above 23 in the world, and only the top 12 players on the Quads rankings were granted entry into their section of the draw. As at 22 May this year, Evans Maripa and Sydwell Mathnosi had rankings of 31 and 43 respectively in the Open Men's division, while Kgothatso Montjane and Lucas Sithole had obtained rankings of 9 and 10 respectively in the Ladies and Quads divisions. ▶



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Lucas Sithole



Sydwell Mathonsi

WHEN OUR SHINING STARS WERE ASKED ABOUT THE FACILITIES OFFERED IN SOUTH AFRICA, TO HELP THEM PREPARE FOR THE GAMES, ALL OF THEM HAD NOTHING BUT PRAISE FOR THE UNRELENTING SUPPORT GRANTED TO THEM BY THE SRSA RESIDENTIAL PROGRAMME AND GAME SPONSOR, AIRPORTS COMPANY SOUTH AFRICA, IN PURSUIT OF PARALYMPIC GLORY.

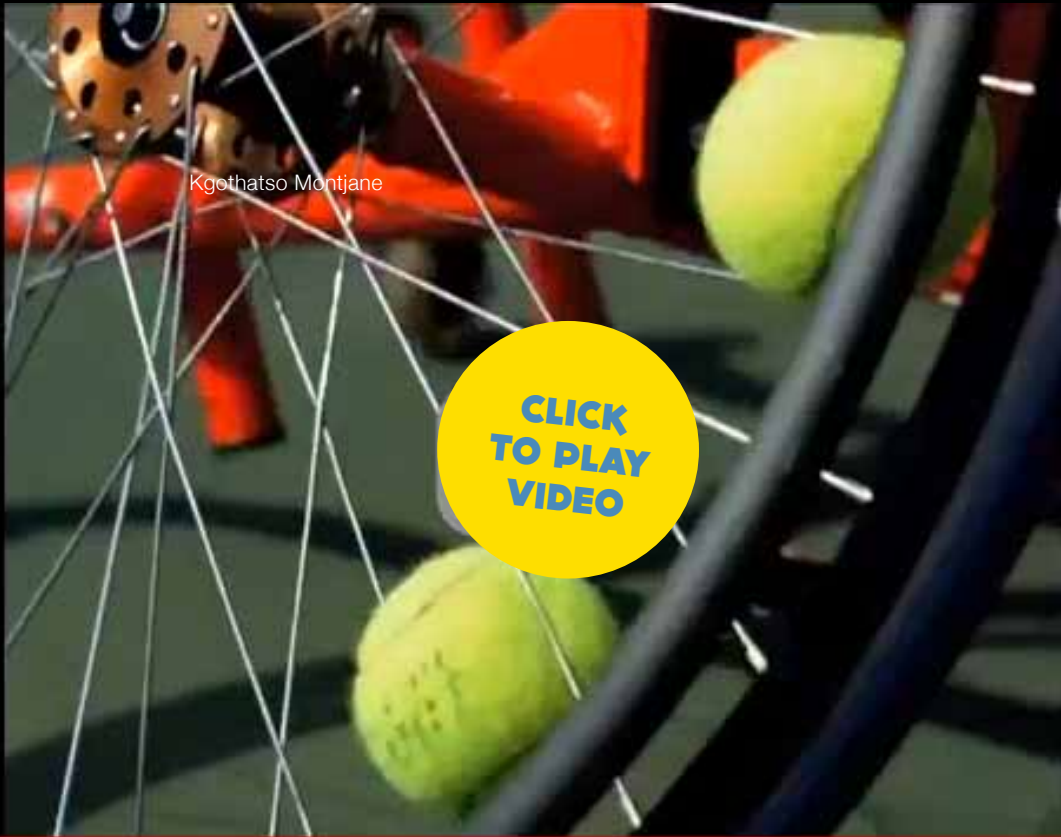
They were given the opportunity to train every day and competed in all the warm up events needed to reach the required rankings prior to the cut-off date of 20 May. They were also ably assisted by two coaches who are named on the global tennis coaches commission. This commission was set up to assist participating nations strive for excellence in the coaching of wheelchair tennis.

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Evans Maripa

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Kgothatso Montjane

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Kgothatso Montjane, Lucas Sithole,
Evans Maripa and Sydwell Mathonsi

WHILE OUR PARALYMPIANS ARE CLEARLY ECSTATIC AT HAVING QUALIFIED FOR THE GAMES, THEY UNANIMOUSLY CONCEDED THAT IF THERE WAS A DOWNSIDE, IT WOULD BE THAT THEY ARE SEEN MAINLY FOR THEIR DISABILITY AND NOT THEIR SPORTING EXCELLENCE. THEY DO NOT RECEIVE THE SAME LEVEL OF RECOGNITION AS THEIR ABLE BODIED COUNTERPARTS WHO COMPETE AT THE OLYMPICS, WHICH OFTEN HAS A NEGATIVE EFFECT ON SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES THEY ARE OFFERED.

Each of the four players we spoke to were asked how the demands of their frenetic training schedule had affected their family lives, as well as their expectations of themselves at the Games. Lucas Sithole expressed the delight of his family. "My schedule did not affect my family that much as I only see them during the holidays when I am not competing. Their dream was that I qualify for the Games on merit and I am so happy that I was able to make this dream come true."

The affect on the family life of Kgothatso Montjane was slightly different. "It has affected my family because I have been away from them for so long. This has created a bit of distance between us. However, they have been extremely supportive and are really pleased to see me qualify to compete in London, which has made them proud. I just want to play the best tennis of my life and enjoy the matches in which I compete. I believe that my results will take care of themselves. My dream is to bring a medal home. Whether I win or not, I am determined to keep playing and stay strong."

Sydwell Mathonsi echoed the sentiments of his teammates. "I am just hoping to play well and win as many matches as possible. My dream is to win a medal, but I know that I have to take one match at a time."

Evans Maripa expressed longing for his family while on the road. "They have missed me very much and I have really missed them too, thanks to my busy year while travelling with the aim of earning enough for prominent events such as the Paralympics. My preparation for the Paralympics has affected my family like no other competition because it has been going on since the start of the year. I do not see or speak to them as often as I would like as I am always busy with my preparations for the big stage, as it is the first time qualifying for the Games. My family has been totally euphoric since I qualified. I am encouraged on a daily basis by their words of encouragement. My goal for the Games is to surpass everyone's expectations and pull out a great performance. By doing this I will reap the rewards of my hard work."

Karen Losch, manager of Wheelchair Tennis South Africa, expressed admiration for all the players who have qualified for this prestigious event. "We are only one of three nations who have players qualifying on merit in all three categories of competition, which are the Men, Women and Quads categories. Our players only started participating in the sport six years ago, while many other countries have had professional players for far longer than this. This is a great achievement for the players and Association."

"I would also like to express heartfelt thanks to our main game sponsor, Airports Company South Africa, which has made a significant contribution to wheelchair tennis and making the players' dreams come true. Without their support over the years we would not have been able to develop the athletes and get them to the Paralympics."

QUICK FACTS ON THE WHEELCHAIR TENNIS EVENT AT THE PARALYMPICS

- The Paralympic tennis event will take place from 1-8 September 2012 at the Elton Manor Tennis Centre.
- Centre Court seats 5,000 spectators.
- There will be 13 courts used for the event, of which six are floodlit.
- In the Men's singles there will be 64 participants competing, while 32 participants will compete for the Women's singles title and 16 participants for the Quads title.
- The referee is Anders Wennberg, who will be assisted by Ian Smith.
- The draw will take place on 30 August 2012.
- Players are selected on the basis of their ITF rankings.
- All qualifying players needed to compete in at least one ITF event between 31 January 2010 and 31 January 2012.
- The wheelchair tennis event was first introduced at the 1988 Paralympics in Seoul, South Korea, and became a fully fledged event at the 1992 Games in Barcelona.
- Initially only Men's and Women's singles and Doubles were contested, but from Athens 2004 the Quad class was also recognised.

DIInfo box

For more information please contact Bianca Morkel on pr@tennis.co.za. Other resources worth a visit include www.tennis.co.za or join our Facebook page and group: Wheelchair Tennis SA and follow us on Twitter: @WCTennis.



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