

MASTERSTROKE

After exchanging basketball for tennis, Lucas Sithole believes he's served his time and can go on to win a medal

WORDS: GARETH DUNCAN MAIN PHOTO: REG CALDECOTT

Lucas Sithole is only the third South African tennis ace to win a major singles title in Australia and joins the company of former greats Johan Kriek and Kevin Curren, who both won the Australian Open in the 1980s.

However, what makes Sithole's feat remarkable is that he succeeded in a wheelchair, and with only the use of his left arm.

The 23-year-old is a triple amputee and South Africa's No 1-ranked wheelchair tennis player in the men's quadriplegic division. During his tour Down Under in January, Sithole picked up the biggest prize in his six-year career when he won the singles title at the Adelaide Open, beating Japan's Shota Kawano 6-2 6-2. He went on to win the doubles section too, with British partner John Parfitt. Then in the Melbourne Open, Sithole continued his fine form to reach his second consecutive singles final, but lost 6-3 6-4 to Great Britain's Jamie Burdekin.

Not bad for a player who remembers a disappointing start to his international career back in 2006.

'I travelled to Holland for my first tournament overseas,' recalls Sithole. 'It didn't go well as I lost all four of my matches. But I wasn't discouraged. I had only started playing wheelchair tennis earlier that year, and I knew if I trained harder, I'd become a stronger player.'

'After my success in Australia, I can look back





Lucas Sithole

and say all the hard work I put in has paid off. It's been a tough journey, but things can only get better from here. My Adelaide Open title makes me believe I can go on and achieve greater things – like winning a Paralympic medal.'

Sithole was born and raised in the small KwaZulu-Natal town of Dannhauser, where he enjoyed a 'normal life' until the age of 12. He lived with his mother and younger sister, attended Siphuthando Combined School and was a talented athlete. 'I was quick back then. I was a good sprinter,' says Sithole.

His life changed dramatically on 5 July 1998, when he was involved in a train accident. On his way home from the shop after buying milk for his family, he and a friend were asked by a local farm worker to help manoeuvre some tracks to put a small train on the correct course – a favour that cost Sithole his right arm and both his legs.

'As I was changing the tracks, the train just rushed forward out of nowhere,' Sithole explains. 'The others got out of the way, but I didn't. I remember just lying there, without being able to move. I was awake during the whole incident. The train manager called for help, and an ambulance rushed over.'

Sithole spent a month in hospital before returning home. With the support of his family and friends, he says he remained positive about life: 'It was obviously frustrating in the beginning. I needed help to do things I was able to do by myself before. But this was my new life, and I decided to embrace it.'

Sithole found his main inspiration in sport. After being transferred to Bubisizwe Special School, he tried out athletics before excelling in wheelchair basketball.

Following impressive performances for the KZN provincial side, he was selected for the SA U23 squad that toured to Kenya for the Afro-Arab Zone qualifiers in 2005. Despite earning national colours until 2008, he would give up the sport to pursue his new love – wheelchair tennis.

'I moved to Pretoria in 2006 to complete my matric year at the Philadelphia School for the Disabled,' says Sithole. 'Early in the year, we got a visit from a man called Patrick Selebi. He introduced us to tennis, and my teacher encouraged me to get involved in the sport.'

'I loved it. While I enjoyed basketball, tennis is an individual sport which allows me to determine my own success.'

It proved to be a great decision as Sithole developed into South Africa's most successful wheelchair tennis player. After



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his achievements in Australia, he is currently ranked 10th in the world's quadriplegic division rankings. If he's able to remain in the top 12 until the end of May, he'll qualify for the 2012 Paralympics on merit.

Wheelchair Tennis South Africa manager Karen Losch is confident the country's No 1 will be able to secure his spot at the London showpiece.

'Our wheelchair tennis players have only travelled to the Paralympics on two occasions – the 1996 Atlanta Games and the 2008 Beijing Games,' says Losch. 'While we didn't win any medals we did well, considering the sport was only professionally established in South Africa in 2005. We had amateur players participating in Atlanta.'

'With Lucas, things are different. He doesn't only have a great chance of qualifying, but he is also a potential medallist. He has grown so much and is now able to challenge the best in the world. The amazing thing is that Lucas only started the game in 2006, while the top international players have been around for more than 10 years.'

Sithole adds that success at the Paralympics will be vital for the development of the sport in South Africa.

'I'm not just doing this for myself. I'm doing it for the growth of the sport,' he says. 'Our women's No 1, Kgothatso Montjane, and Sydwell Mathonsi [men's division] also have a chance of qualifying. If we all make it, I'm sure South Africa will do well and gain great exposure for wheelchair tennis back home.'

'At the moment, we have about 80 internationally ranked players. I'm hoping that number will grow much bigger after the Paralympics.' <

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