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PENTATHLON PERSONALITIES: MEET AUSTRALIA'S NEXT-GEN ALL-ROUNDER



Genevieve Janse van Rensburg can remember it so clearly. That's probably because, in the grand winding journey of an athlete's life, it wasn't that long ago.

Van Rensburg is 20 years old now and heading towards her Olympic Games debut. In 2017, which doesn't feel that long ago for most of us, she wasn't long into in her early teens, still dreaming. Then came the fateful meeting.

"It was sports assembly at school. It was just the way she talked," Van Rensburg tells UIPM News. "She spoke about all the fun things she did when she was training with the Italians and other teams - and everything she spoke about sounded so fun.

"I was sitting there thinking 'I already do the swimming, I already do the riding. I do running at school. So, come on, fencing and shooting can't be that hard!'"

'She' was Chloe Esposito of Australia, the Rio 2016 Olympic Games champion, and she had brought her gold medal to Van Rensburg's school in the Hunter Valley, a verdant rural region two hours northwest of Sydney renowned for wine.

Some bottles, like some dreams, take time to mature. But others don't.



"It definitely came around fast, you know?" Van Rensburg smiles. "You might sit here and think six years is a long time but it really goes very quickly. My first comp was 2018, I only started then but we basically went straight into international competitions.

"Australia doesn't or didn't really have many at the time, so you got to experience a little bit of that cool part of the journey that Chloe had been talking about.

"You got to go overseas and compete right away. You had a target and you knew what she was talking about and it was like 'wow, it is so cool, I love it, I want to keep going'. It was all in sight."

And so here she is with new dreams in sight. Van Rensburg, known as Gen for short, has spent long weeks and months already on the road in 2024. But one journey which can't come soon enough is a trip to Paris in August.

Van Rensburg punched her ticket for an Olympic debut at the 2023 African Oceania Championships in Cairo last August. She did so in some style, finishing an impressive 2nd overall, narrowly behind Malak Ismail of Egypt. It was a day when everything came together for her and even though the distances may have been great, she immediately wanted to share it with family.



“I called mum right away!” she recalls. “I think it was 2 o’clock or 1 o’clock in the morning. I felt so bad but it had to be done. They were super excited. Very happy. Both of them had been up and watching.”

While not from the sportiest family, it was Van Rensburg’s mother who unknowingly got her daughter started in Pentathlon, even if a first discipline was precautionary.

“Well, mum made us swim because we lived in the country and there were lots of dams and quite a high risk of drowning. We always did swimming. My family isn’t really that sporty but I just did things in school myself.

“I just loved sports and did a little bit of everything: I did netball, cricket, I did sailing, surfing. I picked up riding super young and loved it so I was basically just doing swimming, riding and netball until Pentathlon came along.”

Fencing would be a new discipline, then, but Van Rensburg adapted to the piste in preternatural fashion. It’s no exaggeration to say just a few years after picking up an epee, she is one of her country’s best: she won an Australian national fencing title this year.

“I think it was mostly luck that I got good at it,” she laughs. “I only started fencing in 2017 and I dunno, it just clicked really easily. Even though I didn’t train very often. Fencing isn’t a big sport in Australia. So we only had a local club of like 10 or 11 people. So I think I was just lucky in a way.”

Going in against some of the biggest names in the sport knowing she has the ability to dominate a Fencing Ranking Round must give great confidence. But Van Rensburg doesn’t take anything for granted on the piste.

She is studying psychology in university, so the mental aspects of the sport are functional and fascinating. In a hectic year of Olympic preparation there have been some stellar performances

which began with a springboard in fencing.

“I think definitely Budapest was the highlight for me over the last couple of years,” she says of the UIPM Pentathlon World Cup leg where she was imperious in Fencing, leading a qualification group which included the likes of Michelle Gulyas, Elodie Clouvel and Elena Micheli.



“It was me showing that I can put it all together. It’s so tough when you do these competitions regularly with such tough, elite girls, it’s so tough to get through that and remain confident, to trust your progress. So when you do a comp like Budapest and it all just works, it is so nice.”

Van Rensburg admits that Laser Run is the focus of much of her work. She came to running late in life but has put in hard yards training with the Great Britain team in Bath during the European season. Being with an active and welcoming British crew has also allowed Van Rensburg to work on another passion: her sweet treat game.

“I do a lot of baking, to be honest, a lot of baking. I absolutely love it,” she responds when asked how she switches off. “It’s a great one, especially in the UK because there’s a whole team of pentathletes who will eat whatever so I get to bake as much as I want. I watch a lot of Netflix and read books. Aw, Great British Bake Off, I absolutely love it. It’s so good!”

Very soon she will switch back on in a big way. Paris is rapidly approaching. Van Rensburg will return to Great Britain to limber up alongside the British junior pentathletes before making her way to the French capital. Her parents will be there along with her best friend. She is focused on doing them all proud — but herself proud too.

“I haven’t been to the Palace of Versailles but we did a training camp with the British team near there and it was really beautiful where we were. I’m looking forward to it,” she says. “While yes, I do want to soak up everything and it will be very cool, I want to do well and do the best of my abilities. I want to give it, really, my all.”

By Joe Callaghan