Van Zyl embraces competition from foreign legion

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Local runners have been left gasping for air during the past two years of the Spar Women's Grand Prix 10km series.

Namibia's Helalia Johannes stormed to victory in 2019 and, after the 2020 race was cancelled due to Covid-19, Ethiopia's Tadu Nare won all six legs of the series last year to finish as the overall winner.

With two races done and four to go this year, foreign domination has again set the pace after Nare won the second leg of the series in Durban last weekend.

Johannes cruised to victory in the opening race in Gqeberha, Eastern Cape, last month.

Three-time Spar Grand Prix champion Irvette van Zyl was the first South African to cross the finish line in fourth place in the Durban leg.

Van Zyl, winner of the 2010, 2011 and 2016 editions of the race, welcomes the competition from the foreign contingent, as she believes it will motivate the locals to increase their speed.

"It definitely makes the races faster if competition's better," she said after the top 12 runners in Durban had clocked sub-34 minutes.

The popular race, which is run in six cities - Gqeberha, Durban, Mbombela in Mpumalanga, Pretoria, Johannesburg and Cape Town - was previously only open to South African runners.

However, the inclusion of international runners has given the event a boost.

"I just hope there aren't more [international runners] coming!" joked Van Zyl.

"I think we have enough currently, but the competition's always good, as it makes the South Africans up their game. That keeps it exciting for the rest of the season."

Van Zyl and her compatriots will hope to upstage Johannes and Nare at the next race in Mbombela (formerly Nelspruit) on July 16, which is the inaugural Spar race for Mpumalanga.

"I'm definitely looking forward to the race in Nelspruit, where it's going to be hot and nice," said Van Zyl.

Nare's stunning victory over Johannes in Durban last Sunday means there will be an intense battle for this year's title.

The two are now neck and neck on the leaderboard with 59 points each.

Another Ethiopian, Selam Gebre - who finished third in the opening two races - is third on the leaderboard with 56 points.

International runners, including Zimbabwean Rutendo Nyahora, have been prominent and regular participants in the race, but were not allowed to accumulate points or win prize money until 2019, when Johannes reigned supreme.

Veteran Comrades Marathon commentator Ian Laxton explained the foreign dominance over the past two years.

CLEAR GAP Irvette van Zyl with Helalia Johannes of Namibia and the Ethiopian duo of Selam Gebre and Tadu Nare during the second leg of the Spar Grand Prix series in Durban last weekend PHOTO: RODAN WARD

PREVIOUS WINNERS

2007 René Kalmer

2008 Poppy Mlambo

2009 Kalmer

2010 Irvette van Zyl

2011 Van Zyl

2012 Kalmer

2013 Mapaseka Makhanya

2014 Diana-Lebo Phalula

2015 Lebogang Phalula

2016 Van Zyl

2017 Kesa Molotsane

2018 Glenrose Xaba

2019 Helalia Johannes

2020 Race was cancelled due to Covid-19

2021 Tadu Nare

He said South African runners would always struggle, especially against competitors from east Africa.

"Ethiopia and Kenya are the best in the world [when it comes to distance running]. Because they're so good and prominent in the world, these ladies will come here and beat our girls. Tadu's probably only number 20 or something in Ethiopia.

"Having said that, some locals are probably saying: 'Maybe we should stop them from coming to compete in this race and have only South Africans.'

"But if you ask the South African runners, they'll tell you that they want the competition, because it brings out the best in them.

"Even if you go to Europe, the US or the Olympics, the east Africans are going to dominate anyway. That's just the way it is," said Laxton.

Meanwhile, after the race in Mbombela, the next competitions in the Spar Grand Prix series are set for Pretoria on August 6, Johannesburg on October 2 and Cape Town on October 23.

The winners in each race receive R30 000, while the overall champion of the series is guaranteed R190 000.