

## **Wayde van Niekerk**

### **World Record Wayde**

When Wayde van Niekerk ran the fourth-fastest time in history at the 2015 World Championships in Beijing, running 43.48 to take down defending champion LaShawn Merritt, the world was shocked. But Wayde was just getting started.

Wayde was a fighter from the start. Born in South Africa in 1992, he arrived 11 weeks early and weighed just twice the weight of what his future Olympic gold medal would weigh. His mother was warned he might not make it, or at best, be disabled. His mother, Odessa Swarts, was a world-class athlete as a teen. South Africa was violently transitioning from apartheid to democracy, and she chose to oppose apartheid by participating in South African Council on Sport (SACOS) events. During South Africa's isolation, the country's athletes were banned from international competition, and participation in SACOS events was a form of passive resistance. Though Odessa ran a 12.32 100 and a 25.3 200 at age 16 on a clay track, her chances as a black female athlete of achieving world-wide recognition were slim.

But her son has been able to compete on a world stage representing a democratic South Africa. The South African sprinter not only won a gold medal in Rio, but he obliterated a 17-year-old world record, running 43.03 seconds. The previous world record of 43.18 was set by two-time Olympic gold medalist Michael Johnson in 1999.

The most amazing part was that Wayde not only won but set a world record out of lane eight, a hard feat as the other competitors remain out of sight for almost the entire race. It can be difficult to gauge speed and position in lane eight, but it didn't bother Wayde—instead it gave him motivation. And his coach, Anna Sofia Botha, a 74-year-old great-grandmother, wasn't bothered, as “every lane is the same distance.”

Wayde started working with Botha after the 2012 Olympic year when he began his studies at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. She's been the head coach of track and field there since 1990. Wayde credits his success to his coach's strict regime that keeps him disciplined and focused on the goal. With a world record and Olympic gold already in his hands, the sky is the limit.

#### **Questions For Thought:**

1. Wayde's mother helped set the stage for black South African athletes. Have you ever set the stage for big things to come?
2. Wayde won Olympic gold and set a world record out of lane 8, which is very difficult to do. Have you ever achieved something others deem impossible or a disadvantage?
3. Wayde's coach is a 74-year-old great-grandmother. Does success have an age limit?