

Mutola runs from rags to riches

MAPUTO — Six years ago, when she was 15 and poor, Maria de Lurdes Mutola pretended she was a boy and played soccer for a Mozambican team.

But joy quickly turned to tears when her team won the Maputo city league but were disqualified when the runner-up discovered that the winners had fielded a girl.

"Unfair," they said. She had scored the winning goal.

That seemed to be the end of a promising sporting career but then along came her country's greatest poet, Jose Craveirinha, a sports fan, who encouraged her to take up a less male-dominated sport.

Lurdes, as everyone in Mozambique still calls the girl, better known to the world as Maria Mutola, took his advice and trained everyday under the poet's watchful eye.

Today the once-impoverished girl from one of the poorest countries in the world is the champion of the world over 800 metres, one of Africa's newly emerging queens of the track.

Mutola's rags-to-riches story sounds like a fairy tale even to her. "I still cannot believe what has happened in my life," says Mutola.

She was born in the poor Maputo suburb of Chamanculo on October 27, 1972, when her countrymen were fighting for independence from Portugal. After independence in 1975 the country was racked by civil war until a peace agreement was signed last October.

But despite Mozambique's continuing political problems in the late 1980s, her international reputation was starting to grow.

She made her country's team for the 1988 African championships in Algeria as a 15-year-old just a few months after her identity was "unmasked" on the soccer field.

She won a silver medal in those championships — an amazing success for such a raw talent — and although it was no surprise when she was eliminated in the heats of the 800 at the Seoul Olympics soon afterwards, people had noticed her obvious potential.

The following year, she went to

study and train in the United States, a move made possible through Craveirinha's support and a grant from the Olympic Solidarity Committee for Third World athletes.

While studying at Springfield High School in Oregon her running talents were refined and carefully nurtured — and honours started coming her way.

In 1990 she won both the 800 and 1 500 metres at the African championships, while in 1991 she won the 800 gold at the African Games and — still only 18 — finished fourth in the world championships 800 in Tokyo in a world junior record and African senior record time of 1 minute 57.63 sec.

There was relative disappointment in the Barcelona Olympics when she was fifth in the 800 and ninth in the 1 500, but there was some consolation a few weeks afterwards when she won the 800 at the World Cup in Havana, Cuba.

But this has been her truly golden year.

Those two victories prove just how far she has developed in terms of tactical awareness since being criticised by her country's sports-writers for being over confident in Barcelona.

In Toronto, she ran from the front to win — in Stuttgart she made a late burst. That kind of adaptability is a sure sign of mature track craftsmanship in a runner not 21 until next month.

Every champion in Stuttgart not only won a gold medal, but also a Mercedes.

Things have certainly changed for Mutola in a short time and she says she will probably sell the Mercedes — she already has a car in the United States.

Asked recently what she was thinking of while striding towards the finish line in Stuttgart — the Mercedes, the medal or her family back in Chamanculo, Mutola replied: "I only thought of winning".

And football?

"I help in a football school in America. I show them my best shots."

— Ziana-Reuter