

New surname, same superstar: Tatjana Smith is back to best

She struggled in the pool after Tokyo, but has found her groove again as Paris calls. By

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‘Schoenmaker’ half slips out of the mouth impulsively when the name ‘Tatjana’ is mentioned. And for good reason. Hers is one of the most recognisable names in South African sport.

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Since then the 27-year-old has maintained solid finishes in her international races, never finishing below second, but her times have slowed considerably.

Her 200m breaststroke record has also been bettered in the meantime by Russia's Evgenia Chikunova, who achieved 2:17.55 last year.

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Her parents moved back to the Netherlands, where her father was born, after the Tokyo Games, leaving a then 24-year-old Smith who had just been adorned with international praise to find her feet with her new-found fame.

it's just about enjoying the ride and swimming without carrying the burden of pressure. "I'm going in with the same mindset as 2021: just to go and enjoy it," she said.

"Everyone knows I'm going to give my best. No one can expect more than that.

"I know when I come home everyone's going to love me just the same. To be there for the second time is already incredible," she said. **DM**



But the 26-year-old changed her name after getting married last year, and aims to compete at the Paris Olympics as Tatjana Smith later this year.

"I'll be swimming under Smith. Potentially, hopefully, I'll be doing that at the Olympics as well," she said next to the pool at the South African National Swimming Championships in Gqeberha this week.

"I have this slogan – I wish I could swim with a cap that says 'Swimming is just what I do, it's not who I am'. That's also why I changed my surname, because I don't want my identity to lie in swimming," she said.

"I think people only know me as Tatjana Schoenmaker and I really felt that's not who I am; that's just a surname.

"I've grown into a different person. I'm not the person I was in 2021 [when the Tokyo Olympics took place] and I just want to embrace it."

Smith has had a difficult few years in the swimming pool since first making international waves in Tokyo, where she clinched a silver medal in the 100m breaststroke and a gold in the 200m breaststroke. In the process, she set the Olympic record in the former (1:04.82) and the world record in the latter (2:18.95).

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In 2022, the 20-year-old Lara van Niekerk outswam Smith in the 50m and 100m breaststroke, only a year after her Tokyo heroics. Van Niekerk was also on her shoulder in the 200m breaststroke.

Smith took gold in the 100m (1:05.89) and 200m (2:22.44) in 2023, but her times were still nowhere near her Tokyo best.

Back and better

But now, a few months out from Paris, it looks like she's back to her very best.

In the 50m breaststroke, not traditionally her strongest event but one she is expected to dominate locally, she claimed a fantastic first opening day victory and a personal best (PB) of 30.12 at the championships, scraping ahead of Van Niekerk. The event ran from 8 to 13 April.

Smith also swam the second-fastest time of her career in the 200m breaststroke, a few split seconds away from her Tokyo time, in 2:19.01 on 10 April to reignite the belief that she could be on the podium again in Paris.

"I reached the highest point in swimming and after that I really struggled," Smith said about her career since Tokyo.

"This December I swam the fastest time I swam since the Olympics, which is still two seconds off my PB in the 200m. So, to swim a PB in the 50m – I know it's not an Olympic event but it's small margins that show I'm busy getting on track.

"It doesn't mean I'm going to swim amazing times and break records again, but for me, knowing that I'm improving and that it's going better, I feel happier. And that's all that matters – that you're actually enjoying the sport," she said.

"I don't want to do it and be miserable. I'm finding that joy in swimming again."

Outside the pool

In addition to attributing her recent improved results to finding the joy again, Smith says her support system has also played a part.

"I'm very much about my faith, and in those times that I felt hopeless there was always light," she said.

"I never gave up. I knew it might take some time. Everyone's road isn't straight – there are always obstacles.

"I just had to push through and know that there's a reason for those obstacles." Her parents moved back to the Netherlands, where her father was born, after the Tokyo Games, leaving a then 24-year-old Smith who had just been adorned with international praise to find her feet with her newfound fame.

"A lot of things in my personal life have also changed," she said. "I met my husband... [I've found] the comfort of home with my parents emigrating after the Olympics. That was also a massive adjustment. So all those things build up.⁷⁸

“I finally found home. It’s the times when I’m out of the pool where I find my comfort – that’s what has made the difference,” she explained.

She married Joel Smith in November last year. Intriguingly, her husband, who is her manager, is the brother-in-law of Springbok rugby captain Siya Kolisi.

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Paris goals

There is a sense of occasion anytime Smith takes to the pool, whether it’s in a final or a heat, because of the way she takes on every race like it could be her last.

This attitude meant Smith remarkably – and almost accidentally – broke the Olympic and African record in the 100m breaststroke in her first-ever swim in an Olympic pool during the heats in Tokyo, when she registered 1:04.82.

Along with her notable performances in the pool in the past few months, it’s not unreasonable to expect a few podium finishes by Smith in Paris.

But for her, with a new name and attitude, it’s just about enjoying the ride and swimming without carrying the burden of pressure. “I’m going in with the same mindset as 2021: just to go and enjoy it,” she said.

“Everyone knows I’m going to give my best. No one can expect more than that.

“I know when I come home everyone’s going to love me just the same. To be there for the second time is already incredible,” she said.