

Sports chief recalls an Olympic tragedy

NORMAN BAILEY

SOUTH West Academy of Sport CEO Bernice Butlion will be re-running a moment in sports history this week.

Butlion met and ran against Zola Budd at the 1983 South African cross country championships the year before the diminutive athlete left her homeland to go and race for Great Britain at the Los Angeles Olympics against local favourite Mary Decker on a day (August 11, 1984) that lives in sports infamy.

Budd the barefoot sensation set the track world alight in the early 80's as she broke records and stumbled in to a political storm regarding apartheid.

"I remember looking at her and thinking she looks like a boy. I can clearly remember a stick figure with white tape on her feet.

We started the race and she disappeared, left us in the dust. She must have won the event by a kilometre," Butlion said.

"She showed no expression. She was a very shy and modest girl. I think running was her life."

Zola Budd would pay a high price

for that life. After sending a spy to watch her run at events in South Africa the British tabloid newspaper Daily Mail did a deal with her father, Frank, taking her to England where at break-neck speed she was granted a UK passport.

With sporting bans on South Africa from around the world for its apartheid policies judgement on Budd was swift.

Wherever she ran or appeared in Britain, she would be faced with protesters.

By the time of the 3000m women's final at Los Angeles on August 11, 1984 it seemed the pocket dynamo carried the weight of world opinion on her shoulders.

With just over a lap to go Decker and Budd collided, the American fell down unable to get up and with a home crowd of 85,000 baying for her blood Budd finished well back as boos echoed around the stadium.

Butlion believes Budd was a victim of the times, a political pawn.

"I remember watching the race on TV and thinking 'Oh God, poor girl'. Decker felt intimidated by Budd and so pressured her, it was very sad."



South West Academy of Sport CEO Bernice Butlion reminisces about her one-time race against Olympic runner Zola Budd. PICTURE: NORMAN BAILEY