

# Bessie Windell

## Coach, Mentor, Friend

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**A**sk anyone you meet who has had some form of contact with Bessie Windell and the response will always be along the same lines. "What a wonderful person." "Her strength in her faith was unbelievable." "Always positive, always full of life." "Her leaving is a great loss to athletics."

Her leaving? Yes sadly Bessie Windell passed away in September 2008, losing a ten month battle to cancer at the age of 65. For 30 or so years, Bessie Windell encouraged, cajoled and made champions in the athletics World. Names such as Myrtle Bothma – whose SA Record in the 400mh still stands since 1986 – Yvette De Klerk, her SA record in both the 100 and 200m are also still head the stats lists; Marcel Winkler, Hennie Kotze, former SA Record Holder in the 400mh, all ascribed their success to her influence.

But not only did she coach, she also left legacies. Nico Van Heerden, coach of Llewellyn Herbert and LJ Van Zyl learnt a big part of his trade from her. Hennie Kotze took what he learned from Bessie both as an athlete and later as a coach, to take Alwyn Myburgh to an Olympic Final. When Hennie Kotze left for a position to coach in Saudi Arabia, one of his star athletes, Ter De Villiers,

went over to Bessie to prepare for Beijing. And when she passed away Ter had nowhere else to go. "She was the best. So where could I have gone to?" Myrtle Bothma can now be found coaching school kids along the very same principles that she learned for "Tannie Bessie" at Oos Moot School in Pretoria North.

But it was in more than athletics that Bessie left a legacy. "She taught me to dance," says Nico Van Heerden. For Ter De Villiers it was so much more. "When I think about her, I see her, this small stature of a person, full of love for Jesus Christ, and a will above all to live for Him and His glory. I think of how she with so much love in her voice could get me to do basically any training session. I would be half dead, but she would have no mercy. I think of how she opened up her house to us, whether it be for advice, motivation, direction, love or just companionship. I think of how she and her husband Oom Henry portrayed one of the Godliest marriages I have ever experienced. I think of "Loveday", the street, where we use to do hill training, and I see her shouting at us, motivating us to keep on fighting to the top of the hill. I see her, with a bandage around her arm from the morning's chemo, standing next to the track coaching us, not complaining once. I see her



with her sun hat and crocs waving at us to start running. I see her giving every athlete a hug. And so I can go on..."

For 9 time 400m Hurdles SA Record Holder Myrtle Bothma, Tannie Bessie was probably the biggest influence in her life. "I was still an U18 athlete from East London when she saw me compete at Pilditch in Pretoria. She spoke to me about a career in teaching. You see it was not only about athletics was it? A teacher has such a huge influence on our lives and she was already thinking of the next generation. My parents thought it a great idea and at the end of 1982 I jumped on a train to Pretoria to study at NKP. We became more than just athlete and coach, we became friends. In the semester holidays I would stay with her. It was an amazing time and had such a huge influence on my life."

Hennie Kotze feels the same. It was Windell who coached him to success in the 400mh when he broke the 23-year-old SA Record of Gert Potgieter. His time is still the 10<sup>th</sup> fastest of all time in South Africa. "For every athlete she was a role model in all aspects of life, not just on the track. She was always there for me in good and bad times and she and her Husband Henry are the godparents of my children. Their love and loyalty towards my family and I will always be remembered." Like with Myrtle and every other athlete she coached, Bessie also "adopted" the Kotze family as her own.

Her trademark was her incredibly positive attitude to life in all aspects. "Even when she was deteriorating fast in the last months on earth she still stayed positive. You see it was her Faith that gave her such amazing strength and peace of mind," says Van Heerden. "It feels strange not to see her next to the track anymore with her stop watch in her hand." You could see Bessie wearing her sunhat and crocs everyday on the track. But Hennie adds something more personal. "There was always something sweet in her tog bag."

Hennie feels that her positive outlook on life was

addictive to anyone who crossed her path.

What made her such a successful coach, she was responsible for 9 athletes getting their Springbok Colours, was her amazing feeling for movement. She could immediately pick up any flaws in an athletes technique no matter how small. She also always believed in her athletes no matter what the talent and it was that ability that ensured she was always able to get the best out of all her athletes.

It is clear that Bessie made a huge impact on everyone who crossed her path. As Ter De Villiers says, "The way she would always acknowledge Jesus in whatever she did. Whether it was in her stories of what they achieved in the past, whether it was how we will achieve what we set out to do, or whether it was just general talk. You knew this was a God fearing woman that would not compromise her belief for anything. She also never complained, never, never, never. To me that was such an inspiration. I mean here you have a woman, diagnosed with one of the most aggressive cancers, but yet living life to the fullest. Giving, of herself and her time, to not only her family, but to athletes she did not really know. I miss to see her way of life, the way she approached it. The way she silenced the unspoken critics. The way she did not just roll with the punches, but actually punched back so hard, it was scary. The way she just took the deck of cards she was dealt, and made something of it. I learned so much from this woman in the eight months I was coached by her, that I would not trade it for anything. If she entered your life, she made an impact on it. I was coached on the track by Tannie Bessie with precision and little mercy, but above that, I was unknowingly coached in my approach to life. And for that I truly thank Jesus Christ for bringing her on my road. It is just amazing to see the people He uses."

Quite clearly Bessie's passing away has left a huge hole not only in athletics but also in the lives of many. Bessie Windell a true Legend, may her soul rest in peace 🌈