

# Small-town girl with a big heart is pumping in Europe

● *Nieuwoudt is the recent winner of the fiercely contested Challenge Family triathlon series held around Europe*

Mark Etheridge

From the little town of Christiansburg in North West came a tiny triathlete who has the biggest of hearts ... but it's a vital organ that has also led to some heart-stopping moments.

Meet Magda Nieuwoudt, recent winner of the hotly contested Challenge Family triathlon series held around Europe.

Nieuwoudt won four of the events and placed second in two others. She won Challenge Fréjus, Challenge Gursan-Saemangeum, Challenge Davos and Challenge Sanremo. That saw her winning the season with 1,450 points in the Challenge Family World Bonus standings.

That earned her a whopping \$25,000 cash bonus (close to R500,000) which should come her way in the next month or so.

It's rich reward for an athlete who has spent her life scraping and scrapping to fulfil her dream of being a pro triathlete.

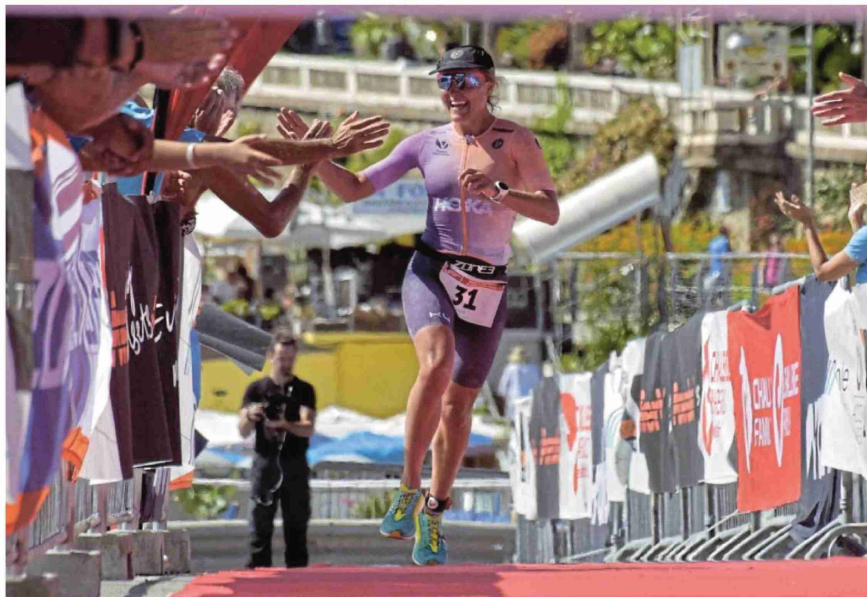
Her journey has taken her from Christiansburg "where I was raised in a loving family and had the best childhood possible" to North West University where she graduated with a BSc degree in human movement and nutrition, to Middelburg where she started her own sports science academy at the local high school.

The latest leg of her journey sees her in Pretoria where, apart from her own triathlon career, she also runs her own highly successful Trivium Triathlon Club. And the family ties are still real. She now lives with twin sister Rika, is under no obligation to pay rent, and is able to devote her life to her sport.

"Rika's my guardian angel ... she always has been. But she's getting married in April and I have to become a grown-up again," says 33-year-old Nieuwoudt.

She was born with a love for sport. "I just loved all sports at school, especially athletics and cross-country. I was dreadfully competitive, I always had to be at the front."

Such was her love for running that at the tender age of 13



**Leading the way:** Magda Nieuwoudt crosses the line to win the Challenge Sanremo, one of four triathlons she won in the recent Challenge Family triathlon series held around Europe. /Alberto Fumi

she probably became the country's youngest subscriber to Runner's World magazine. "I just devoured the science of running, recovery and stretching."

Before her triathlon career took off she took part in duathlon. Her debut world champs were in Scotland in 2010 where "I was just hopelessly unprepared, especially in the mental sense".

But in typical Nieuwoudt fashion, she picked herself up and two years later placed third at the world champs in France.

Her pro triathlon career started in 2017, "but what a bummer it was. I had a vision but soon realised I just wasn't good enough at the time. I raced six races, but everything just went badly and it took so long to learn and I was let down by sponsors.

"Then I started my own club and that also took time. I only had between three and six athletes so couldn't buy anything in bulk, but it was my dream and I kept on fighting. Now I have 65 athletes and two other coaches. It's grown so big I can't accept more people because I wouldn't be able to give them enough personal attention."

The next year, 2018, was a life-changing event in many ways for Nieuwoudt.

"I did a triathlon in Staffordshire in England, but while I was swimming I couldn't feel my arms or legs. I tried to bike but had to look down to see if my feet were actually cleated in and I ended up pretty much walking the run."

In November that year she was in Cape Town preparing for

a triathlon in Hermanus (Race to Stanford) on the south coast that weekend. "My coach then, Niel du Plessis, sent me to cardiologist Dr Wouter Basson for some advice on the correct threshold turn points doing stress ECG and VO2 tests, etc."

"After he had done some tests, it was then that he told me if I went to Stanford I would probably die in the swim leg. My heart rate was spiking between 46 and 180 beats per minute with 30 seconds and doing it repetitively for a few times."

The condition is known as SIPE (swimming-induced pulmonary oedema) and is the main cause of cardiac arrests (and deaths) during the swimming leg of triathlons. The heart's left ventricle doesn't function properly and the condi-

tion is worsened by the compression effect of a wetsuit and anaerobic training/racing. Basically the power of the heart muscle to contract and fully get the blood pumping out of the heart was not sufficient.

There followed a frustrating, at times seemingly futile, period. "I had to control my heart rate to ensure that my body was still getting enough blood, but all at under 120bpm – for three months! Oooh, there were lots of tears. I didn't feel or look like an athlete. I was at gym 'running' at 7-8 minutes per kilometre, then I'd have to walk again."

"I did tons of research, went on an extremely low carbohydrate diet. That way I could end up going for four- to six-hour bike rides. Then, about a month later, I could let my

heart rate go up to 135bpm."

The results of all that low heart-rate training is that her heart is extremely strong considering what she's been through, and she can handle running at 4min 30sec/km for 90 minutes and all under a rate of 135bpm.

"Thanks to my then coach [Niel] and PVM Nutritional Science, who helped me plenty during this period. I couldn't have done it without them."

"I've learnt a lot, even though I have a few scars on my heart from the damage," Nieuwoudt says.

The start of a new year sees new goals for the non-stop Nieuwoudt, the champ from Christiansburg, who – when she's not swimming, running, cycling, coaching or competing – likes making food, sitting around a braai and enjoying a glass of fine wine.

"Last year was about racing for the financial means to get to Iron Man in Kona, Hawaii, where I have unfinished business next year. This year I'm doing Iron Man SA because it's local, but with it being my sister's wedding the weekend before, I may be racing with a bit of wine in the system," she says jokingly.

Her main goal will be Challenge Roth in Germany in July, after which she'll take a break and decide on the rest of her year. But don't bank on too much of a break.

"There's never much off-time ... I try to slow down but I simply can't. But when I do, I fall asleep in three minutes."

She doesn't even have time for romance. "I'm single, with 60 Trivium athletes to look after, and it keeps me insanely busy. I think the right relationship will come, knowing that it's not just about getting but also not giving. And I can't give to someone right now."

Could this year and the next be the time SA wakes up to the talent-in-waiting of the kid who hated coming second? Watch this space because there's no doubt that when it comes to triathlon, she's giving – and giving her absolute all!