



Oscar Pistorius takes time out at an international event a few years ago. BELOW: Snapped by a hockey player at the University of Pretoria recently.



TOO DOWN TO RUN

Oscar Pistorius is said to be too traumatised to train. What will it take to get him back on track?

By GLORIA EDWARDS and RICHARD VAN RENSBURG

IT'S the question on many people's lips: will we see the Blade Runner back in action and competing at international level sometime soon?

The answer seems to be "yes" after a picture of Oscar Pistorius (26) wearing his blades on an athletics track appeared in newspapers. But his family says he's still so traumatised by the trial in which he's been charged with the murder of his girlfriend, model Reeva Steenkamp (29), he hardly ever leaves the house, let alone trains or thinks of competing.

Meanwhile he was spotted on Saturday 6 April at popular cocktail lounge Buddha Ta in Fourways near Joburg having dinner with two women, one of them his ex-girlfriend Jenna Edkins, an eyewitness tells YOU.

"He has a beard and his hair looked darker," she adds.

"Everybody was looking at him and as he walked out people were calling out to him and elbowing him. He was walking down the stairs and fell. Someone grabbed him just in time."

"#OscarPistorius is at Buddha Ta in 4ways," another patron tweeted.

Oscar's uncle Arnold Pistorius confirmed that Oscar had spent the evening at Buddha Ta "with friends. He wasn't behaving recklessly and wasn't drunk."

Since the relaxation of his bail conditions the Paralympic champion can now go out in the evening – and travel internationally, opening the door to compete in world athletics again.

But the question remains: does Oscar want to resume his international career? And more to the point: will he ever be able to perform at his peak again after the traumatic events and long layoff in training?

BASED on the principle that you're innocent until proven guilty, Oscar would be free to compete, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) recently said in a statement shortly after the relaxation of his bail conditions.

The IAAF also confirmed he's free to take part in the World Championships in Mos-

cow in August, provided he qualifies and is selected for the SA team.

But it's unlikely Oscar will be invited to the London Anniversary Games in July, UK Athletics chairman Ed Warner told The Telegraph last week.

On 24 March Lisa Smith, a member of Voortrekker High School in Pietermaritzburg's hockey team, snapped Oscar walking on the athletics track at the University of Pretoria's (UP) High Performance Centre. The picture, which was posted on the hockey team's website and later appeared on the front pages of newspapers, caused a stir worldwide.

Oscar's agent, Peet van Zyl, initially said neither he nor Oscar's coach, Ampie Louw, were aware of the fact that he'd been at UP that day, the newspaper Beeld reported.

He later confirmed Oscar had been there, but to accompany an Australian training group and "was just having a jog around the track", not training.

Yet at least two other independent sources told the newspaper they'd seen Oscar training at the track on the weekend of 21

March before the controversial picture was taken.

Lisa and her teammates were excited to see Oscar on the track because many people still regard him as their hero and a sport icon. They weren't in any doubt about the fact that he'd just finished training.

But an athletics coach who also recently saw Oscar at UP told YOU a different story, on condition he remains anonymous.

When he saw Oscar he was sitting on the track and wasn't wearing his blades. He was thin and unshaven and a psychologist was sitting next to him, talking to him. Oscar didn't say much and it appeared he didn't really want to train.

In a statement his family insists he's still too traumatised to train.

His uncle Arnold confirmed that since the relaxation of his bail conditions, Oscar had been out running on a few occasions "but each time has been very difficult and he's struggled immensely with the decision to even leave the house".

He added Oscar wasn't officially back in training. "Oscar is still in an extremely traumatised state and has made it clear to all of us that he isn't able or willing to even contemplate this issue at this stage."

Arnold admits Oscar's family want him to get back on the athletics track so his emotions can stabilise. They regard it as an essential step for him to come to terms with the trauma of Reeva's death and his impending trial.

"He's going to be the one that determines running and training," Peet said. "It's his call. He's the one under all the pressure of the court case and grieving for Reeva."

But will Oscar's heart really be in it if he continues running? Experts say it depends on how he copes with the pressure of a lengthy court case.

International analysts speculating about his possible return to athletics say people in stressful situations yearn for an environment where they feel at home and have control – such as the athletics track and the routine of a training programme.

Just like people who retire might initially feel disoriented because their daily lives were regulated by work, athletes can also feel lost without the schedules, structure and discipline of their sport.

For instance after he was banned from cycling, Lance Armstrong took up triathlons with cycling as one of the legs, while baseball gave structure and meaning to Michael Jordan's life after his initial retirement from basketball.

How will a long break in training affect

Oscar's athletic career prospects?

"Oscar can be out of training for years and still come back if he has the motivation," says well-known South African sports scientist Professor Tim Noakes.

Oscar hasn't competed since September – initially due to a break but more recently because of Reeva's death. He'd been out of training for about two months when he was spotted recently at UP's sports centre.

But Professor Noakes says all it will take to get back to his previous fitness and strength levels is "the same time he's been out".

A layoff for a significant period could result in an athlete being unable to sustain his pace at the end of longer sprint events in particular, says North-West University sports scientist Dr Ben Coetzee.

But will Oscar be able to excel at top level ever again after such a traumatic and life-changing experience?

"It depends on how he controls his mind," Professor Noakes says. "He needs counselling as he'll be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. One would assume this will be crippling unless it's addressed."

Professor Noakes says sportspeople who are used to training regularly won't necessarily become "clinically depressed if they don't run. Running lifts your mood but can't reverse serious depression."

On the notion that athletes might become dependent on for instance the endorphins released during intense training he says, "Running makes you feel good but it's not addictive in the same way a drug is. The dependence is more about how you define yourself."

"If you define yourself as a world-class athlete and you suddenly lose that status, the loss of status compounded by not exercising is the real cause of subsequent psychological issues."

Although a lack of exercise doesn't always have a significant physiological impact on athletes, psychological factors could, Dr Coetzee says. "A period of stress has a catabolic [breaking down] effect on the body."

Cortisol levels increase, which can affect muscles and bone formation and make you susceptible to illness. "There's also proof it's linked to a decline in serotonin levels in the brain which can lead to depression."

He'd like to get Oscar back to doing what he loves, his coach Ampie told journalists some time ago. Training would help him "clear his mind. It will be a good thing."

But in the end it's all down to Oscar. **S**

EXTRA SOURCES: OSCARPISTORIUS.COM, NATIONAL POST, IAAF



AMPIE LOUW – COACH

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ARNOLD PISTORIUS – UNCLE



'A period of stress has a breaking down effect on the body'

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