



OSCAR CASE

Henke Pistorius (left), Oscar's dad, and Dr Gerry Versveld watch Oscar performing at the London Olympics on a big screen in Joburg.



'I'M THERE FOR THEM'

The doctor who amputated Oscar's legs pledges his support for the family

By GLORIA EDWARDS

HE'S watched Oscar Pistorius (26) growing up, from the time he amputated his lower limbs to the day he achieved global recognition as the first double amputee to participate in the Olympic Games.

And despite the murder charge, Dr Gerry Versveld is firmly behind the world-famous athlete, just as he was from the start.

The moment he heard about Reeva Steenkamp's (29) death on Valentine's Day he phoned Oscar's dad, Henke (59). "I was heartbroken," Dr Versveld says. "It was the last thing I would have thought could happen.

"I didn't question Henke about the incident. I just told him I was there for them. I could hear he was traumatised."

The last time Dr Versveld had seen Henke was in August last year when they'd watched Oscar participate in the London Olympic Games on a big-screen TV in South Africa.

"His father couldn't be in London for the first heats so we watched it on TV together. He was so proud of his son."

It was a great moment for the surgeon too as he watched the boy whose legs he'd amputated years earlier making history.

Dr Versveld, an orthopaedic surgeon at Netcare Sunninghill Hospital in Sandton, Johannesburg, is described in Oscar's biography as "a wonderful person and family friend" who played "an essential role" in Oscar's life. In the book the athlete thanks him for his support.

Dr Versveld recalls how difficult it was back in 1987 for Henke and Oscar's mom, Sheila, to decide to have their son's lower legs amputated. "Oscar was only 11 months old. His parents did a lot of research and consulted several doctors in SA and overseas. But the construction of his feet was such that repeated reconstructive surgery would have been necessary. It wouldn't have been the best solution."

So when he advised them that amputation of both his legs up to the knee was the best solution they were shocked.

"I explained that Oscar was still young enough and hadn't yet learnt to walk, so he wouldn't experience any trauma losing his feet. But it was traumatic for his parents," Dr Versveld recalls.

"When he became active in sport they were so proud of him."

Through the years Dr Versveld often saw

Oscar as his prostheses had to be adjusted, and he often attended the boy's athletics meets. He even went to the Paralympic Games in Athens, Greece, in 2004, when Oscar first competed.

"It was an exciting time in his life and an unbelievable experience. Henke sent me SMSes over the years to keep me up to date on Oscar's progress and achievements," he says proudly. The doctor recalls treating a 16-year-old Oscar for a knee injury incurred during a rugby game. "I told him it would be preferable not to play rugby again. The thing with Oscar was he wanted to do everything other kids did – and he did."

Biokineticist Dr Heinrich Nolte, who treated Oscar after the rugby injury, remembers him as a "pleasant young man" who was "very popular and friendly". "As part of his rehabilitation he had to do a lot of running exercises, which shifted his interest from rugby to athletics," Dr Nolte recalls. "He started participating in athletics more seriously. It was amazing to see first-hand his determination and progress.

"His dad was also very involved. Henke came along to the treatment sessions to support Oscar. For a long time thereafter he kept me informed of Oscar's progress at sports events."

At high school Oscar didn't allow other learners' teasing to get him down, Dr Versveld recalls. "As a child he never complained. He was focused and determined and always friendly. I really liked him . . . I still do." ■



Oscar always believed he was no different to other kids. Here he is on the beach, playing like any other toddler.



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