

By Hannelie Booyens

Make MINE

DOUBLES



SA-born tennis star Liezel Huber is aiming to win Olympic gold

SHE'S a wildcat of tennis who has laid claim to a host of major titles – now Liezel Huber is aiming for Olympic gold for South Africa in 2008.

When Liezel and Cara Black of Zimbabwe won the doubles title at the recent Australian Open, South Africans were proud to hear she's now regarded one of the world's top women's double players.

Experts believe she and Cara have an excellent chance at Olympic gold in Beijing next year and behind the scenes plans are being made to make it possible.

She might have to become a US citizen to make it to the Games but Liezel (30) sees this as a last resort and other options are urgently being explored. The issue has been reported out of context, she adds.

Although she lives in the US she says she doesn't feel like an American.

"It's my dream to bring the gold medal home to my country. I'll always be

a South African in my heart," she says, beaming.

LIEZEL was just 15 when she went to America to attend a tennis course that lasted only a few weeks but she did so well she was offered an opportunity to stay.

It was the first step on a journey that would take her around the world. She now has 16 doubles titles to her name and has won more than R10 million in prize money.

She also has an American husband, Tony Huber. They married in 2000 and live in Houston, Texas.

It hasn't always been easy.

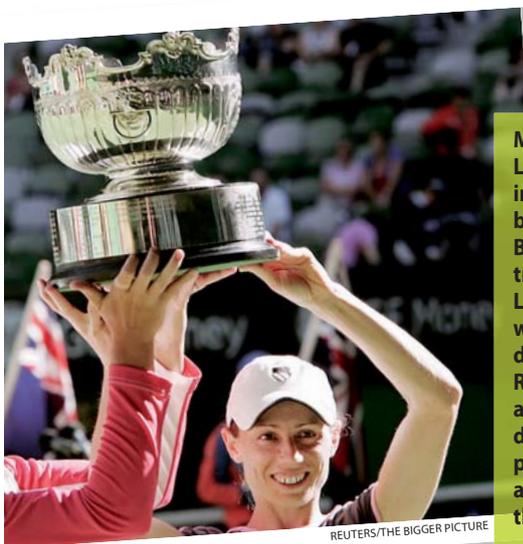
"There were plenty of opportunities to train and take part in tournaments but I didn't have a sponsor and it was difficult," she says.

"I missed home terribly. I had to grow up very fast but I wouldn't swap the experience for anything."

Her family in Durban are sports-mad and they all played provincial tennis. Mom Sica belonged to a tennis club and once the adults were done with their games Liezel, her twin sister, Monita, and her brother,

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MAIN PICTURE: Liesel Huber (left) in action with doubles partner Cara Black in the Australian Open. **LEFT:** Liesel and Cara with their women's doubles trophy. **RIGHT:** With Richard Branson at a dinner where he presented her with a Humanitarian of the Year award.

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and e-mail friends and relatives. After a session in the gym she's off to the courts where she spends up to five hours.

She serves on the International Players' Council and is a World Tennis Association mentor.

"I never sit still. Tony and I have a big motor

home and we love hitting the road in it. My mother-in-law lives in Arizona and we often drive 19 hours to get there."

LIEZEL was fourth in the world doubles rankings when she injured her knee. She's now ranked six.

Since it has become known she might have to compete for America in next year's Olympics the SA Tennis Association has been involved in long talks with her trying to change the situation.

There are two hurdles. Cara must get South African citizenship; fortunately her mom was born here.

Then there's the thorny issue of how many matches Liesel has to play for South Africa in International Tennis Federation tournaments before she can qualify for the SA Olympic team.

Johan Koorts, chairman of the SA Tennis Association, is negotiating with the SA Olympic Committee and other government departments on her behalf. "Let's keep our fingers crossed," Liesel says.

Who knows – we may just be celebrating gold in tennis in Beijing next year. □

Janus, would play until it was so dark they could barely see the ball.

Liesel turned professional in 1993 but never excelled as a singles player. She realised she was better suited to doubles and teaming up with Wimbledon legend Martina Navratilova began racking up the titles.

They remain good friends. "We're always phoning each other and she recently invited me to go skiing with her in Aspen. She gave me a Jack Russell so we're pretty much family. Martina is sweet and one of the most genuine people I know."

Liesel's first major victory came in 2005 when she and Cara became the Wimbledon doubles champions. But disaster struck soon afterwards – she tore the ligaments in her knee.

"It was traumatic. I didn't know if I'd ever completely recover. I couldn't find a doubles partner for ages because I had to prove myself all over again."

But she and Cara hooked up again last year and now seem unstoppable. It helps they're both from Southern Africa and have known each other since they were teenagers, Liesel says. "And we both love Appletiser and biltong!"

"I looked at the devastation and realised I couldn't just sit back and watch," she says. "I cried my eyes out and told Tony we had to do something."

The next day a homeless family of eight moved in with them. "I e-mailed everyone I knew to ask for help. Martina Navratilova and lots of other tennis players immediately donated money.

"I worked more than 18 hours a day and we finally helped 20 families."

So began Liesel's Cause, an organisation that raised money to help families with housing. Last year the World Tennis Association recognised her selfless service with an honorary award for Humanitarian of the Year.

She was overwhelmed when Virgin boss Richard Branson presented the award to her at a glittering dinner.

"I felt honoured and humble. The fate of the disaster victims put my problems in perspective and made me realise how thankful we should be for the little things in life."

Liesel and her parents are now building a school in Durban and last year she sponsored a tennis

tournament for girls in Pretoria.

She and Tony met through tennis. "He's laid-back and relaxed," she says. "It's the thing I like most about him."

He's also her coach and partners her on her travels around the world. "We're good friends and it's wonderful my work allows us to spend 24 hours a day in each other's company."

Tony has learnt to speak a little Afrikaans, Liesel says with a laugh. "He can count to 10 and say *eet jou kos* (eat your food)! My mom taught him."

Liesel hopes to play tennis until 2010 then start a family. She and Tony want to have two kids and adopt two more but until then their three dogs are their children.

There are eight stables on the property they bought recently. "We're thinking about getting a horse or perhaps a farm animal or two."

They plan to build a tennis centre with 12 courts on their estate and call it Huber's Tennis Ranch. "Tony also wants to open a Nando's there – it's his favourite food."

Liesel is extremely disciplined. She gets up at 5 am to do admin

WHEN Hurricane Katrina hit the American South in 2005 Liesel – still recovering from her injury – discovered a new side to herself.

RIGHT: Liesel with her proud parents, Jan and Sica Horn. **FAR RIGHT:** Liesel and her husband Tony at the 2005 Wimbledon ball.

