

Diekmann makes history in Tunisia

• HELGE SCHÜTZ

MAIKE Diekmann made history in Tunisia on Saturday when she became the first Namibian rower to qualify for the 2020 Olympic Games.

Competing at the African Olympic Qualification Regatta on Lake Tunis in Tunis, Diekmann put in a great performance to win the women's single scull final, finishing more than 20 seconds ahead of Nihad Benchadli of Algeria, while Lieben Dickens of Zimbabwe came third.

It was the culmination of years of hard work and Diekmann was elated on having achieved her dream.

"I am so happy to have reached this goal of mine and to represent my beautiful country so proudly. It's very exciting to know that I have put our country on the map in rowing. It still feels a bit surreal to me that I am going to the biggest sport event in the world - the Olympics!" she said when contacted yesterday.

The competition started last Thurs-

day, with Diekmann comfortably winning her heat in a time of eight minutes 34,0 seconds, ahead of two canoeists from Zimbabwe and Uganda.

The semi-finals were held on Friday, with only the top three canoeists progressing to the A final, and Diekmann once again won her heat in a time of 8:32,17 to set the fastest heat time and qualify for the final.

In the final on Saturday, she got off to a great start and by the 500m mark had already built up a considerable lead. From then on Diekmann was able to control the race, remaining well ahead by the 1 000m mark, before she went on to win the race in a time of 8:21,65, with Benchadli and Dickens finishing more than 20 seconds behind.

In the end, only Namibia and Morocco qualified for the Olympics from the A final of the women's single scull, while Uganda, Togo and Kenya qualified from the B final. Diekmann said she had prepared very well and her months of hard work had paid off.



Photo: Contributed

AFRICAN CHAMPION ... Maike Dieckmann (centre) poses on the podium with Nihad Benchadli of Algeria (left) and Lieben Dickens of Zimbabwe (right).

"I have had great preparation this year and felt very confident and strong coming to the African qualification regatta here in Tunisia. I came here to make sure I grabbed a spot for the Olympics - that was my main priority and everything else was less important. "However, I felt like I had a good chance to take the win if I stayed calm and relaxed and focused on everything I have been doing for the last few months; especially believing in myself and backing my training. I have received so much support from so many friends and family members in differ-

ent places and I feel really grateful for that, and sharing this with them gives this accomplishment so much more meaning," she added.

Diekmann's coach, Grant Dodds, said it was a great achievement and that she was a great role model for young Namibians. "I'm exceptionally proud of Maike. She is a role model for all young girls and her achievement proves to other young women what is capable, when you set your mind to a goal and work at it everyday for a long period. Today is a great day for Maike and Namibia!"

Dodds also thanked the Namibian Rowing and Canoeing Federation, the Namibian Olympic Committee and Olympic Solidarity for their support and added that they hoped to raise N\$500 000 to help Dieckmann prepare for the Olympics.

"We hope to raise more than N\$500 000 through Olympic Solidarity and Namibian sponsors for preparation training camps, international competition and equipment to assist Maike in her preparations for Tokyo," he added.