In the badland border of South Africa, up near the Limpopo River, lies the Freedom Run, the route that ragged frontier jumpers take when escaping from the horrors of Zimbabwe. A few years ago, not far from that route, a 12-year-old made a dash for glory.

An impoverished South African schoolgirl, Caster Semenya, who used to sprint barefoot to classes across the blood-red earth, took part in a sports day and raced to easy victory. Some of the onlookers objected. She was a boy, they said, not a girl.

“She was stripped of a medal after local teachers complained,” recalled Semenya’s former headmaster. “But we all backed her. She was reinstated as the winner.”

Six years on, the same controversy and humiliation have returned for Semenya on an altogether grander stage: the world athletics championship at Berlin’s packed Olympia stadion. Under the blitz of a thousand digital camera flashes and in front of a television audience estimated at 100m, Caster last week ran like the wind to win the 800 metres.

Mariya Savinova, a Russian who finished fifth in the race, raised doubts over Semenya’s gender and Elisa Piccione, an Italian who came sixth, was damning. “For me she is just not a woman,” Piccione said.

In the wake of Semenya’s victory Nick Davies, spokesman for the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), revealed that the body had been left with no option but to “verify” Semenya’s gender. The “extremely difficult” process, he said, would involve an endocrinologist, a gynaecologist, an expert on gender and a clinical psychologist. “It is a complex series of different tests,” claimed Davies. “As for the full results, we don’t expect these for some weeks, or even months.”

Is it really that hard to tell a man from a woman? And if so, where does the line lie in athletics?

IN a school photograph taken shortly before her 15th birthday, Semenya stands awkwardly

under the blinding African sun. A full head and shoulders above her classmates, she is dressed in men's pleated trousers and an unflattering shirt. Her friends wear knee socks and skirts.

According to Eric Modiba, headmaster at the Nthema secondary school where Semenya was a star pupil, she was "unique" from the start.

"When she was a young girl Caster was stripped of a medal at an athletics meet after teachers complained she was a boy, but she was reinstated on my insistence as the winner," he said. "In fact it was commonplace for 'toilet checks' for Caster whenever she competed in inter-school championships.

"I was caught out, too. Caster was always rough and played with the boys. She liked soccer and she wore trousers to school. She never wore a dress. It was only in grade II that I realised she was a girl myself.

"The way she looked, so masculine, did cause her some problems but few were brave enough to bully her."

Adversity was nothing new to Semenya. She came from an impoverished broken home, living cheek by jowl with her brother and sister, neither of whom seemed out of the ordinary. Her mother Dorcus, 50, a trainee care worker, claims her daughter is being victimised precisely because of her poor background: "How can a poor girl like Caster take on the world and win? Will these people not allow this? It seems they will not.

"How can she succeed against all the odds? Some people don't want to see this. I feel so proud of my daughter. She's a woman. I gave birth to her. They must give what my daughter deserves. She won that medal fairly."

Dorcus admits her daughter's progress is far from ordinary. Unusually for a young woman perhaps, Semenya's main interest has been WWF wrestling, a sport notable for competitors with extraordinary physiques.

“Her obsession is wrestling,” said Dorcus. “She has many wrestling posters, particularly WWF.” Her favourite figure is John Cena, a bodybuilder who became a world wrestling champion.

She has had no time for boyfriends and takes her athletics seriously while studying as a sports science student in Pretoria. “At university she works hard and trains constantly,” said Dorcus. “She is a shining example to her brothers and sisters and everyone she grew up with.”

The turning point in her life came just three weeks ago, on July 31, when she won the African junior championships in Mauritius. She ran the fastest 800 metres in the world this year — by anyone, junior or senior. Within a week the Athletics South Africa hierarchy had catapulted her into the world championship squad.

From the wings the IAAF, already concerned about the increasing use of steroids in middle-distance racing, watched and waited. The closer the Berlin championships got, the louder the whispering campaign around Semenya’s “improbable” ascendence to the world stage became. Her arrival in Germany was preceded by speculation in athletics chat rooms about her “butch” appearance and then direct questions about her gender.

When she arrived in Berlin it got worse. At the warm-up track, runners pointed and stared at her. Their complaints were taken on board. Even before Semenya reached the 800 metres semi-finals, the IAAF had already demanded that South Africa’s governing athletics body should submit her for gender verification. The South Africans cried foul, claiming a conspiracy against their greatest medal hope.

The problem for athletics is that it has never quite worked out what to do about competitors who blur the line between the traditional image of men and women. Controversy goes back at least as far as the Berlin Games in 1936, when Helen Stephens, an American, beat her great rival Stella Walsh to win the 100 metres. Stephens was promptly accused of being a man.

When German doctors inspected Stephens, they concluded she was a woman. But the story did not end there. In 1980 Walsh, who had won a gold medal at the 1932 Olympics, was killed by a stray bullet during an armed robbery in Cleveland, Ohio. An autopsy found that she had male

genitalia and both male and female chromosomes.

In an attempt to solve such controversies, athletics authorities began routine testing for gender in the 1960s. At first female athletes had to strip naked and undergo invasive gynaecological tests. After the advent of the tests, a suspicious number of international women athletes suddenly retired.

So humiliating were the tests that in 1968 the International Olympic Committee decided to use cheek swabs to determine an athlete's chromosomes instead. Women usually have two X chromosomes; men an X and a Y chromosome.

According to the rules, only those athletes with two X chromosomes could be classed as women. However, many geneticists criticised the tests, saying that sex is not as simple as X and Y chromosomes and is not always straightforward to ascertain (see panel).

Professor Kath Woodward, an expert on gender testing in sport at the Open University, said: "The very term 'gender verification' suggests we could get at the truth, but gender is complex. The coverage of Semenya's case illustrates how troubling gender is in sport.

"More people than we imagine do not conform neatly to the genetic and physical criteria that mark the two sexes."

ALTHOUGH the results of Semenya's tests will not be known for some time, the whole of South Africa seems to support her. Last week headlines in the nation's newspapers extolled "our golden girl" and paid other tributes with heavy emphasis on the teenager's gender.

Brian Sokutu, a spokesman for the African National Congress, said the governing party had been left "disgusted" by Semenya's treatment, and yesterday the head of South African athletics confirmed he had quit the IAAF over the row. Within athletics there is also a groundswell of sympathy for Semenya led by Michael Johnson, the US Olympic sprinter.

Another who understands the difficulties Semenya faces is Andreas Krieger who, when he was known as Heidi Krieger, won the European shot put gold medal in Stuttgart in 1986. Krieger was given so many steroids when competing that she developed masculine features and eventually had surgery to change her sex.

“When people questioned if I was a woman or a man, it was a tough time,” he said. “I didn’t want to show my face in public for about 10 years. ”

Semenya’s situation is different, apparently brought about by natural causes, but still challenging. She is rumoured to be depressed despite her victory which, if validated, will change the economic fortunes of her impoverished family.

At 18 she is only just beginning as a middle-distance runner. Experience shows that such athletes become more powerful as they grow older. There is no reason why she could not compete for another 15 years — if the IAAF decides she can participate as a woman and if she can cope with the scrutiny and suspicion.

Either way, in the eyes of her mother it is inner, not outer, strength that counts. “My daughter is beautiful,” said Dorcus. “An angel. What mother would not be proud of such an achievement. You tell me who would not be reduced to tears by what she has done against all the odds.

“She is the perfect woman in my humble opinion and it was God who made her this way.”

Additional reporting: Richard Lewis

Between the sexes

Women usually have two X chromosomes (a stretch of DNA containing genes), while men have an X and a Y chromosome. However, ascertaining a person’s chromosomes may not be enough to determine their sex because hormones also have a role to play.

The default human sex is female, but if an embryo has a Y chromosome, male characteristics will begin to develop about eight weeks after conception. A gene on the chromosome triggers the development of testes, producing the male hormone testosterone.

However, for some people born with male XY chromosomes, not enough, or faulty, testosterone is produced. Instead of developing as a male, they take on a female appearance.

In the same way, if a foetus with XX female chromosomes is exposed to excess testosterone in the womb, the child may develop male sexual characteristics, such as a deeper voice and facial hair.

It is thought that about one in 1,000 babies are born with such an “intersex” condition, the general term for people with gender abnormalities. It may be physically obvious from birth: an XY child with not enough testosterone usually results in female or ambiguous genitals (and internally, underdeveloped or possibly absent testes); while an XX child with too much testosterone usually results in male-appearing genitals (but with a uterus and ovaries as well).

In “true” cases of intersex, a child with either XX or XY chromosomes has both both ovaries and testes.

In milder cases, however, the chromosomal and hormonal confusion may remain unknown to people all their lives.

Source: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/