



Thando Lolwane and his son, Gladwin.

By MALIXOLE GWATYU

LOLWANE

scoops top award

Thando Lolwane, who featured on the cover of *Farming SA*'s April issue, recently won South Africa's New Harvest Farmer of the Year Award.

After the inaugural ceremony for this competition ended, Lolwane, who farms near Gelukspan in South Africa's North West province, walked away with a brand-new Toyota Hilux bakkie.

Says Andrew Kirby, Senior Vice-President for Sales and Marketing at Toyota, "The main goal of the competition is to recognise and credit previously disadvantaged farmers who have risen above the impediments of farming, such as a lack of natural, financial and human resources."

After travelling about 7 000 kilometres around the country, a lot of laughter, detailed evaluations and a warm reception from the 10 finalists, an unanimous decision was reached. Then farmers from all over the country, accompanied by their loved ones, gathered at a Johannesburg venue for the awards ceremony.

Not everyone could be the winner, but all the farmers received certificates and praise for being the best under "very difficult conditions".

A JUDGE'S VIEW

Professor Carlu van der Westhuizen, Director of Agriculture and Environmen-

tal Sciences at the Central University of Technology in the Free State, said, "Any of the 10 finalists could have been the winner, but Lolwane was better on the day."

Van der Westhuizen, the architect of this competition, also dismissed "myths and suggestions" that developing farmers were not cracking it in the sector. "Our black farmers are in the top bracket of farming," he said, "and succeed under difficult and sometimes unfriendly circumstances.

"If this is the benchmark for farmers in South Africa, we will be able to produce the food we need for the nation."

The judges' criteria for the competition included looking at the candidates' management practices and business philosophy, their vision for the future, their records, financing and filing system, and their investment philosophy. Marketing strategies and personnel practices (labour and housing) also came under scrutiny. Profit was not used as a criterion.

HOW LOLWANE WON

Lolwane's business philosophy set him apart. He hones his skills through training, participation in study groups and

mentorship programmes offered by Agri North West and private consultants. The judges were also impressed by how he used communal land, renting what he needed from others. This, the judges

WHAT HIS

COIS HARMAN, a director of AgriStart in Zeerust in South Africa's North West province, helped Thando Lolwane through tough times.

In South Africa, farming is about survival of the fittest; in this case a North West province farmer who puts his trust in God. He's learnt to survive when drought strikes, when hail destroys the harvest and when the dam wall cracks – and cannot be fixed. And Thando Lolwane has, more than once, found out what it is like for financial institutions and officials to turn their backs on him.

During August/September 2007, when his spirits were low, the Department of Land Affairs invited him to apply for a top crop farm that boasted a central pivot irrigation

felt, is an opportunity available to many rural inhabitants but used by very few.

Although Lolwane recently bought his own farm, he continues to farm on communal land as a means of diversification. He also diversifies by subcontracting some of his irrigated land to external producers such as McCain, and at the same time carefully selects his crop rotation cycle on dry and irrigated land.

This award-winning farmer uses available nutrients and moisture in the soil optimally, as well as market opportunities, to boost his farm's cash-flow position.

He uses the results of his crop rotation trials in his farming operation, as well as the latest technology in seeds and crop protection.

Over the years, Lolwane has built up an impressive array of farming implements and machinery, and currently also does contract work for other farmers. A combination of enthusiasm, practical skills and basic financial knowledge has turned Lolwane into a successful farmer, who manages a multi-crop farming business. After being named the winner, a stunned Lolwane said, he never "saw this

day coming". He thanked all those who had believed in him and encouraged young people to follow in "our shoes".

THE OTHER CANDIDATES

The competition's organisers received 28 entrants, recommended by various agricultural role players and institutions within the sector. A shortlist of 10 finalists was selected, and the overall winner was chosen from among them.

The other nine finalists, in no particular order, are:

Trevor Abrahams, citrus farmer, Western Cape

Themba Hinana, wool and sheep farmer, Eastern Cape

Queenie Hlongwana, sugar cane farmer, KwaZulu-Natal

Lepati Macaphasa, grain and livestock farmer, (Kestell) Free State

Makgoro Manny, mango producer, (Tzaneen) Limpopo

David Mashinini, beef and game farmer, Eastern Free State

Stephen Mohale, tomato grower and livestock farmer, Limpopo

Paul Morule, beef cattle farmer, (Lichtenburg) North West

Basie Nzimande, sunflower producer (Rustenburg), North West. 🌍



Thando Lolwane proudly shows off his prize. (Photographs: COIS HARMAN)

ADVISOR HAS TO SAY

system. The farm, La Rey Stryd, is situated between Mafikeng and Lichtenburg.

The interview was tough and he was surprised to hear that his application had been successful. "Never again will I have to watch my whole crop disappear because of severe drought. That 35ha central-pivot system will definitely help me to secure an annual harvest," he says.

An agri-processing company offered Lolwane the chance to rent out half his pivot irrigated fields to them, on an annual basis, so they could plant potatoes. He was advised rather to go for a monthly rental so that he could secure a regular income which would enable him to pay his monthly expenses, including the electricity bill. The income helped him to buy the diesel needed to plant more than 100ha sunflower and 45ha maize.

He realised he didn't have the money to cultivate the farm he had just got from the Department of Land Affairs, but he was able to rent out the dry-land crop fields. He then

used the rental income to plant a total of 69ha white maize and 180ha sunflower.

Lolwane then told his bank manager about the steps he had already taken, and said that his crop looked excellent. He had to use all his already-planted crops as security to reactivate his account and to get the money to plant the maize.

He started to harvest sunflower in April and before the end of the month he was able to pay off all his debts, including the entire production loan he had received to plant the maize under irrigation – long before he harvested the maize. This year, he also planted wheat under irrigation.

In the morning of the Monday before the award ceremony, just he completed irrigating the wheat crop, one of his workers sent him a message to say that the dam used for pivot irrigation was irreparably damaged.

His advisor agreed to meet him at the dam to discuss what they could do. Contractors were consulted and, when they arrived at the

dam, they had a very good idea of what the costs would be to fix the dam. Before 10am a decision had been made about how to proceed and a contractor was appointed to build a new dam as soon as possible. In just 10 days, the pivot irrigation system was working again, watering the wheat.

Lolwane takes full responsibility for all the activities on his farm. He knows his job, and is always willing to learn, but what sets him apart from other new farmers is that he can fix and maintain his own equipment.

He plans properly, gathers all the information he needs before he takes any decisions and makes sure finance is available before he starts any task. Every year, he plants trials of his usual crops so he can choose the best cultivars.

Lolwane keeps all his receipts and files them according to service provider. He appointed a qualified bookkeeper to help him with his annual tax returns and VAT.

Lolwane is a great role model for other farmers. He does have difficulties from time to time, but he is secure in the knowledge of where his strength comes from. 🌍