

SPORT

sport

Athletics

Newham & Essex Beagles will have plenty of chances for medals when the England team heads to the 2018 Commonwealth Games.

Nethaneel Mitchell-Blake, 23, travels to Australia's Gold Coast as a World champion, having anchored Great Britain to a magnificent sprint relay gold in Stratford last Summer, beating the Americans as Usain Bolt pulled up with an injury.

His big goal will be the individual 200 metres and the Newham-born runner, who has a best of 19.95 seconds, won the British title at the distance and finished fourth in the World Championships behind Ramil Guliyev.

With Wayde van Niekerk missing, his big rivals could be Jareem Richards of Trinidad, Andre de Grasse of Canada and Isaac Makwala of Botswana.

Robbie Grabarz should be favourite for high jump gold, after another British title in 2017, but he could only finish sixth at the Worlds with a clearance of 2.26m.

He was ranked third in the world last year and if he can match that, he will go close.

Rabah Yousif has a point to prove this year as, despite finishing second over 400m in the British Championship, he missed out on individual selection for the Worlds.

He teamed up with Matt Hudson-Smith, Dwayne Cowan and Martyn Rooney to pick up silver in the 4x400m relay and he will look to go one better in Australia.

But he will also have a chance to prove himself in the individual event and the Beagle has a good chance.

Asha Philip could only make the semis in the Worlds, but the 27-year-old British champion, will certainly be eyeing the 100m final.

Tiffany Porter of Woodford Green could only finish sixth in the World Championships 100m hurdles, but will be one of the favourites this year.

And last, but by no means least, is the return of Perri Shakes-Drayton.

The Bow-born, Victoria Park Harrier, who went to Holy Family Primary School in Poplar and Bishop Challoner in Stepney, has recovered from an horrific knee injury suffered in 2013.

Shakes-Drayton has switched to the flat 400m which she will tackle at the Games, if she comes through *'Dancing on Ice'* unscathed!



Newham & Essex Beagles youngster Finette Agyapong in action at the European under-23 Championships in Poland, where she flew the flag for Great Britain by winning 200m gold. Pictures: UK ATHLETICS



Beagles golden girl Finette flying off to Gold Coast for Commonwealths

If 2017 was a pivotal year for young sprinter Finette Agyapong, then 2018 could be the year where she comes of age on the track.

Still only 20, the Plaistow-born Newham & Essex Beagle won European under-23 200 metre gold last year and also competed at the senior European Cup in Lille as well as the Diamond League meeting in Monaco as she burst on to the global athletics scene.

"I think winning gold in Poland at the European under-23s was my big highlight of the year, but I managed to do so many other things," said Agyapong.

"The championships in Bydgoszcz was my big goal of the year. I went there to win gold, but also just to relax and enjoy it and it all came together really well and I also got a personal best."

That time of 22.86 put her fifth in the UK rankings for the year, but she also excelled at both 100m and 400m during 2017.

"I competed in the 100m at the British Championships just for a bit of sprint work," she added.

"I wasn't expecting to do that well, but I clocked a PB of 11.49 in the semi-final and was seventh in the final," she said, with a chuckle.

It is that natural sprinting talent, nurtured by her coach Coral Nourrice, that has seen her climb the rankings and she even tried her hand at 400m in August and managed a time that not only put her eighth in the UK rankings, but also earned her a call-up to the England team for the Commonwealth Games.

Athletics

DAVE EVANS

dave.evans@archant.co.uk

"It was a really good year for me," she added. "Obviously winning gold at the European under-23s was the pinnacle, but I also really enjoyed being invited to run in the Diamond League meeting in Monaco.

"There I was, in the same race as all these household names who I had watched on the TV and it was such a thrill. I certainly didn't feel out of place."

The Beagle, who is combining her athletics career by studying law at Brunel University where she is in her second year, finished fourth in Monaco, behind British team-mate Dina Asher-Smith, confirming how far she has come.

So what about the Commonwealth Games, which take place at the Gold Coast in Australia in April?

"It is going to be great," she said. "I have never been to Australia before and I am so looking forward to it."

"I will know some of the athletes going, like Asha Philip, Bianca Williams and Corinne Humphreys, but it will also be really good to be in the village and mix with some of the athletes from all the other sports."

So what are her hopes Down Under?

"I am in the 4x400m relay squad, which was a little bit of a surprise," she admitted. "I did a



Finette Agyapong, racing in the black and gold colours of Newham & Essex Beagles, will be hoping to make her mark for England at the 2018 Commonwealth Games in Australia. Picture: CLAIRE JONES/NEWHAM & ESSEX BEAGLES

400m towards the end of last season and got quite high in the rankings which got me the pick, but I am also competing in the 200m."

That is Agyapong's main event, the one where she had made her name, but she will be up against some formidable opponents when she gets there.

Some people have written off the Commonwealth Games as a lesser competition than others, but with the likes of Jamaica, Canada, Australia and Kenya eligible to send teams, that seems to be wide of the mark.

Olympic champion Shaunae Miller-Uibo from the Bahamas,

Crystal Emmanuel from Canada and Simone Facey from Jamaica, as well as Asher-Smith and Williams, all ran faster than her last year, and are eligible to run in the Gold Coast, but Agyapong is confident of doing well.

"My aim is to make the final," she said defiantly. "It will be a tough competition, but I am fit and training well and I think that is possible. It would be great."

Agyapong also has her eye on the European Championships at the Olympic Stadium in Berlin in August and if she can make that, then like her Beagles clubmate Philip, the athletics world could be at her feet.