

Herbert Henry Mckenley O.M., O. D., C. D. (1922 – 2007)

Herbert Henry Mckenley was born in Pleasant Valley, Clarendon on July 10, 1922, the son of Dr. Alexander Mckenley and Mrs. Zilpha Mckenley (nee Mannings). He grew up with two other siblings: an older sister Vioris and a younger brother Dudley. In 1934 Mckenley enrolled in the Mico Practicing School after which he attended Calabar High School in 1937. Herbert Mckenley's talent as an athlete was nurtured from a tender age by his grand father, William Manning who recognized his grandchild's talent and would make Herb compete with visitors to their home with the prize being a three-penny if he won. Herb's mother however desired that he be a violinist, so he took violin lessons with George Neilson.

During Herb's early years as an athlete, he participated in the Boy's High School Track and Field championship where he was known as "Coco's Mango". He was given this name because Leroy "Coco" Brown of Wolmer's High School constantly defeated Mckenley in the championships. However, Herb was soon to take his revenge in the first ever international meet in Jamaica in July 1941. He raced Brown over the 100m and 200m six times and won five of the six events. He also beat his school boy idol Arthur Wint in the 200m.

In 1942 he enrolled in Boston College as the first Jamaican to be awarded an athletics scholarship to attend an American University. In 1945 he transferred to the University of Illinois where Coach Leo Thomas Johnson was instrumental in his development as an athlete. As Herb recollects "Almost religiously he kept telling me, 'Herb you can be the greatest quarter-miler in the world if you want to be'..." (Townsend et al, p16). It was on Saturday June 1, 1946 that Herb made his first world record which was to be denied due to a 6.2 m.p.h. following wind. Mckenley went on to defeat one of his main competitors, Elmore Harris in 29.8 seconds to shatter the 300 yards outdoor world best. It was discovered that Herb had an oversized heart and a very low pulse rate hence was able to recover quickly after running fast. In 1947, seven days after again being denied the World Record he became the first Jamaican to hold such a record at Edwards Field in Berkley, California where he ran a 46.3 quarter mile. In August of 1948 the Olympic Games were

taking place; Herb was the surest sure thing to win the 400m as stated by Jesse Abrahamson of the New York Herald Tribune. But his country man and childhood idol, Arthur Wint was to take the event.

In 1950 Mckenley submitted to the Jamaica Amateur Athletics Association (JAAA), an eight point programme to develop track and field in Jamaica. This programme led to the development of athletics clubs across the island and also included advice to the Jamaica Amateur Athletics Association (JAAA) to establish branch offices to reduce strain on the central office and also to increase accessibility to the services they provide. In 1951 Mckenley was Jamaica's only representative to the Pan- American games where he won bronze medals in the 100m, 200m, and the 400m. In the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki, Finland, Herb placed second in the 100m and the 400m and gold in the all time best mile relay. This was also a world record performance for Mckenley as he was recorded as running 44.6 seconds for his leg of the relay, a world record performance of 3.03s

Henry Herbert Mckenley was appointed Supervisor of Athletics in Jamaica effective August 1, 1954 and coached the Jamaican National Team from 1954 to 1973. He also coached the West Indies Federation team in Rome in 1960. Mckenley was both Manager and Coach of the Rest of the World team versus the Soviet Union in 1971.

In 1972 Herbert Mckenley unsuccessfully attempted to enter representative politics through the Jamaica Labour Party by contesting the St. Andrew North constituency. In 1977 he was Head Coach of Americans World Cup Track and Field team. In 1978 he was elected President of Jamaica Amateur Athletics Association. He went on to manage the Americas World Cup Track and Field team in 1979 and coached the same team for Rome 1981. Herbert Mckenley was also manager of First Life Assurance Company beginning in 1982.

Herbert Mckenley also gave back to where it all began; he coached the Calabar High School Boys High track and field team to 17 of 18 victories.

AWARDS

1947

- National Life Quality Award.
- Athlete of the year – Central and South America.

1973

- Order of Distinction (officer).

1980

- Recipient of Special Recognition Award from Athletic Commission of France.

1983

- Honoured by Customs Tourers of Jamaica.
- Inducted into the America's Black Hall of fame (sports).
- Chairman's Special Award Carreras Sports Foundation.
- Illinois Comeback Award

1985

- Honoured by the Calabar Old Boys' association.

1986

- Promoted to Order of Distinction (commander).
- Shore Athletic Club Hall of Fame.

1987

- Honoured by the International Amateur Federation with a fiftieth anniversary gold medal.

1989

- Inducted in the Jamaica Sports Hall of Fame.

1990

- Herb Mckenley day was declared in New York, United States of America. Sunday April 29, 1990.

1991

- Norman Washington Manley award for Excellence.

1992

- Awarded the silver Olympic order by the International Olympic Committee in recognition of his sustained interest in and contribution to sports, nationally and internationally, over the past fifty years.

2002

- Honorary medal from the rotary club of Kingston for his service to the club and also to Jamaica.

2004

- Order of merit for his distinguished service to athletics locally and internationally.

2006

- International Olympic committee presented him with a set of special Olympic rings which are presented to outstanding Olympians.

The life of Herbert Henry Mckenley came to a close on Monday November 26, 2007 at the University of the West Indies Hospital at the age 85. He was laid to rest in a state funeral at the national arena and interred at the National Heroes' Park. As stated by the Honourable Bruce Golding, Prime Minister of Jamaica:

"Jamaica is going to be the poorer for his passing but Jamaica is immensely richer for the life that he lived, for the achievements that he made, and for the symbol that he represents to a struggling people who want to succeed".

SOURCES

1. Biographical Notes (National Library of Jamaica Collection) - Henry Herbert Mckenley
2. Carnegie, J. The Jamaican Tradition of Greatness in Sports. Kingston: Agency for Public Information, 1977.
3. Phillpotts, K. Some of the World's Greats in Sports. Jamaica: Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, 1980.
4. Townshed, Carnegie H. Herb Mckenley Olympic Star. Jamaica: Institute of Jamaica, 1974.