'Herb McKenley - world record holder'

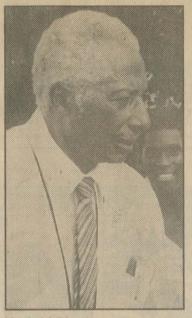
BY BORIS BLOOMFIELD

IT is said that the greatest city was once a thought and it is a fact that the mighty oak grows from a small acorn. It is also true that dreams become reality. Perhaps those that do are visions.

In 1945, not many Jamaicans dreamt that Jamaica would or could have had the distinction and status of world record holder in athletics. In fact, athletics had not vet attracted much popularity in Jamaica. Many people saw it as a waste of time although the Boys' High School Track and Field championships started in 1910 as almost an exclusive club, a one day event involving six schools. The championship produced bright stars too, notably the late National Hero Norman Manley who ran the 100 yard event in 10 seconds flat in 1911, his son Douglas who equalled it in 1941, Arthur Wint and Herb McKenley.

McKenley, in 1945 was a student at the University of Illinois. He had transferred from Boston College where in 1942 he enrolled as the first person from the English speaking Caribbean to have won an athletics scholarship to a US college.

Twenty-three year old McKenley arrived at Illinois in September of that year. Two



Herb McKenley

weeks after his arrival his coach Leo Johnson looked him in the eve and asked. "Herb, would you like to be the greatest quarter-miler in the world?" McKenley, recalling the occasion at his INSPORTS office in Kingston said he thought Johnson was joking. But coach Johnson was serious and over the next six weeks kept asking the question and suggesting it could be done, Herb said.

It was at the end of this period on a cold night in November 1945 that McKenley had the dream, the vision of world championship. The dream was clear and real. Herb dreamt that he was run-

was 46.4 seconds held jointly McKenley were real. The Chicago Tribune the following day carried the sports page headline - "Herb McKenley - new world record holder". All this happened in perhaps a few minutes of dream.

Herb awoke disappointed to find his pyjamas soaking wet and bed linen "all over the place". Coach Leo Johnson analysed the dream. He told Herb that his sub-conscious had accepted it. Herb told coach Johnson he was ready for the challenges, sacrifices, denials, demands and the price he would have to pay on the road to that goal. McKenley said he had been aroused by the cheers and glory he had experienced in that dream. "Things that made me feel good."

Leo Johnson wrote his training programme.

There were vast acreage of farming around Illinois University - wheat, corn, sugar cane. The bedrock of the training programme was cross-

ning at a championship athlet- country running to build musics meet at which he broke the cles strong enough to withworld record for the 440 yards stand the pounding and event with a time of 46.2 sec- tremendous stress that sprintonds. The record at the time ing exerts. Many were the bruises and cuts inflicted by by Ben Eastman and Grover the leaves of sugar cane and Klemmer of the USA. The corn. There were also the cheers, excitement and periods of frustration and announcement that the new exhaustion but McKenley world record holder was Herb endured. The taste of glory had been sweet in his dream. The real thing must be sweet-

Superbly fit

On Saturday June 1, 1946 on a rain drenched, laneless cinder track a superbly fit McKenley broke loose in the 'Big 10' quarter-mile event. An eyewitness is reported to have said, "it was like no one else was in the race with him."

Herb McKenley hit the 220 yards at 20.9 seconds and the tape at 46.2 seconds exactly as he did in his dream less than a year before. The Chicago Tribune's headline was almost identical. Unfortunately that time was not for the record because a wind of 6.2 mph over the straight 220 yards stretch had nullified it. Herb got instead a five minute standing ovation from the 9,000 strong crowd at the Memorial Stadium Champaign, Illinois and a gold watch as Illinois Champion athlete of the year.

of defeats in the remaining months of 1946 and into 1947, his main rival being Elmore Harris of Morgan State College. Herb recalls Harris as "strong, tough, a warrior". Perhaps one of the worst periods for McKenley was August 1946.

At an invitational meet at Sabina Park, running for the first time in Jamaica since achieving fame abroad, Herb lost five of six races. Worst, his father who had not been enthusiastic about his son's running career was seeing him compete for the first time. Herb blamed tonsillitis for his poor performance and the elder McKenley, a medical doctor, examined him on the spot and admitted him to Nuttall Hospital for surgery the same night. That was after he scolded Herb for making him waste his time when he had his patients to attend.

On June 6, 1947, at Compton California, Herb McKenley ran 10.4 seconds over 100 metres and 46.4 seconds over 440 yards in Dayton, Ohio, the following weekend. It was the first time in a year he had broken the 47 seconds barrier over the quarter mile. The dry season

On June 21 at the finals of the NCAA Championship in Salt Lake City, Utah, Herb,

McKenley suffered a number the 440 yards defending champion was too sick to eat. The venue is 4,400 ft above sea level and Herb had never run at such altitude. Three times during training at high altitude he had blacked out. He was, however at the starting blocks. This is how "Sports Illustrated" Roy Terrell is reported to have described the event 14 years later:

"Fleeing around the University of Utah track like a lightning shadow, Herb reached the 220-yard mark at a suicidal 20.8 with (Dave) Bolen on his heel, dying. By the time Hustling Herb hit the home-stretch he didn't hear the boy from Boulden anymore. Herb broke the tape at 46.2 seconds."

Again the time was not ratified as a world record as it was wind-assisted. But the vision of late 1945 was realised as a week later an enduring and persisted Herb ran 46.3 over 440 yards at Edwards Field in Berkeley, California. Jamaica had its first world record-hold-

As a mark of appreciation, love and respect for this great Jamaican Olympian who has been a tremendous inspiration to the nation, a function "An Evening with Herb", will be held in his honour at the Wyndham New Kingston, on Friday, June 9.

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