

remembering



Herb McKenley

Jamaica's track and field legend



FAREWELL!

Great McKenley stands second to none

Jamaican track and field sprint legend Herb McKenley, who delivered medals at the 1948 and 1952 Olympics, passed away recently at the University Hospital of the West Indies after ailing for some time. Among the great Jamaican athletes, the 85-year-old stands second to none. In the years between World War II and his retirement from competition in 1954, Herbert (Herb) McKenley, supreme quarter-miler and sprinter, did everything there was to do except win an individual Olympic gold medal. At the 1948 and 1952 Olympic Games in London and Helsinki respectively, he won three individual silver medals—twice coming out at the wrong end of photo finishes. In 1952 he provided one of the great relay legs of all time as Jamaica took the 400 metres relay gold in world record time. To this day McKenley remains the only man to have reached the finals of Olympic 100 metres, 200 metres and 400 metres in the same meet. The first man to run the quarter mile under 46 seconds and under 45 seconds. He was at various times world record holder at 300 yards, 440 yards, 300 metres and 400 metres.

At a time when outdoor track meets were usually run on dirt or grass, he ran the quarter-mile in under 47 seconds on 65 occasions. He was to evolve from competitor into arguably Jamaica's most influential track and field coach and administrator, playing a lead role in the development of every generation of athletes since the 1950s. Up to just a few years ago,

McKenley maintained a guiding hand on the track and field programme at his beloved Calabar High School. And on any given evening—until infirmity made it impossible—he could be found at trackside at the National Stadium watching keenly as young, hungry athletes strove for distant goals. Born July 10, 1922 in Pleasant Valley, Clarendon, to medical doctor Alexander Givens McKenley and his wife Ziipha Bell, Herb McKenley claims he first came face to face with his athletic future while involved in physical education sessions as a 15-year-old at Calabar. Thin and lanky, McKenley used to easily outrun the "fat boys" during PE sessions. One day the sportsmaster saw him and told him to come out for the school's track and field team and "learn to run". According to McKenley, he immediately rejected the suggestion: "I said, 'Sir, I don't need to learn to run. I can run already.'" But the issue was far from over. Soon the youngster was summoned by the headmaster. He got a lecture that was to stick in his mind forever.

"The headmaster told me how



important it is to belong. He said I should always be faithful and loyal and that next to the love of my family I should love my country and my school. "He asked which sports I played. I told him I played cricket. He told me I should go out for the cricket team as well as the running team... that's how I got started," McKenley said. After overcoming the initial hostility of the "town boys" who disliked the idea of a "little country boy" running with them and beating them, McKenley rapidly established himself as a leading sprinter at Calabar. Like so many other great Jamaican athletes, McKenley honed his skills at Boys' Championships. By 1942, he had earned a track scholarship to Boston College where he quickly stamped his class by winning the US National AAU Championship over 400 metres in 1943. He was to retain the title every year until 1949.

In 1945 McKenley transferred to the University of Illinois following a disagreement with the Dean of Boston College and for the first time learnt he could compete on "a global scale". According to him, one day his coach Leo Johnson (who was later to play a pivotal role in the development of half-miler George Kerr) said to him, "Herb, how would you like to be the greatest quarter-miler in the world?" McKenley laughed and paid little attention, but his coach was to repeat the question "three or four times" in the following weeks. Then one night McKenley had what he considered to be nothing short of a spiritual experience. "I dreamt one night that I was running in a track meet and I

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was running like hell. I won the race with the officials announcing I had set a new world record of 46.2 for 440 yards. "I woke up and could not believe it. I was in a sweat. The clothes were all wet from the race. I was sure I had been running..." he said. Johnson later told McKenley that what he had experienced was his sub-conscious accepting the possibility that he could be the world champion. It was

you wouldn't want to run with him," he recalled with a chuckle. Just days before the Olympics, McKenley suffered a major scare when he strained a groin muscle. He recovered well enough to – perhaps unwisely – contest the 200 metres placing fourth in the final. Over half century later, McKenley believes over-confidence cost him the gold medal in the 400 metres final. "I started out very well. I came off the first turn just eating up everybody," he recalls. He ran the first 200 metres in 21.1 seconds and appeared well on the way to an easy victory when he decided he would not only win the gold medal but decimate the world record. "I felt so easy and relaxed I completely changed



now necessary for McKenley to consciously seek to achieve what his sub-conscious had already accepted. But to do so, Johnson said, McKenley would have to work like he had never worked before. For the next several months, Johnson kept McKenley on a rigorous programme of cross country running aimed at building his strength and stamina. It was the hardest work he had ever done and McKenley claims he often thought of quitting. "The thing that kept me going was the cheers of the people in my dream," he said. He soon reaped reward for the effort. In the indoor season he broke the 400 metres indoor record with a run of 47.9 seconds on a board track.

He followed up in the outdoor season by breaking the outdoor record with a 46.2 clocking on a muddy, waterlogged track. It was the same time he had clocked in his dream. Sweeping all before him, McKenley approached the 1948 Olympics – Jamaica's first ever – as a clear favourite for the 400 metres. But confident though he was, McKenley knew that his six-foot four-and-a-half inch compatriot Arthur Wint was a man to fear. "He had a tremendous stride. It was intimidating. If you looked at him run

my way of running and decided like I was going after 45 seconds flat," he said. But 40 metres from the tape, McKenley suddenly realised he was in deep trouble. "It was like I came up against a brickwall... I found myself shortening and couldn't do anything about it," he recalls. To make matters worse he could hear Wint coming. "I could hear Arthur coming... He was like that... you could always hear his footsteps coming... boom, boom, boom, boom... gaining all the time and I couldn't go any faster ... then he went by and took the gold. I always thought it happened because of my over-confidence," McKenley said.

Wint won the race in 46.2 seconds with McKenley a step behind in 46.41. To make matters worse for McKenley and the relay team, Wint who was also a silver medallist in the 800 metres, pulled up in the 400 metres relay to deprive the Jamaicans of a likely gold ahead of the Americans. An attack of mumps almost kept McKenley out of the Helsinki Olympics in 1952. Ironically the short recovery time after the illness influenced him to run the 100 metres at that Olympics as part of his speedwork for the 400 metres and allowed him a shot at another

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