

McKenley's final race draws praise and pain

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THE sharp hoot of the whistle was missing. There was no clap of the starter's gun and no roar from the stadium crowd, but Jamaican Olympian Herb McKenley's final race across the sands of time yesterday was no less legendary than the first which brought him fame.

Hundreds of Jamaicans, many of them men whom he had trained to run like the wind, yesterday paid their last respects to the track legend in a star-studded official funeral at the National Arena in Kingston.

The cheers and jubilation were missing, but the awe he inspired in life was still evident when he entered the doors of the National Arena for the last time, borne on the shoulders of members of the Jamaica Constabulary's Guard of Honour in a flag-draped coffin.

It was the last leg in a magnificent race. This time he was



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B/N MCKENLEY, Herb

National Library of Jamaica

Members of the Jamaica Constabulary's Guard of Honour carry Herb McKenley's flag-draped coffin into the National Arena. They are observed by McKenley's eldest daughter Laura (first left) and widow Beverly (second left). McKenley was later laid to rest at the National Heroes Park in Kingston.

BIN McKenley, Herb

McKenley won the world, never lost his soul

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unchallenged and in a lane for one. Herb McKenley, born on July 10, 1922 in Pleasant Valley, Clarendon, was returned to the soil he loved to race upon.

The gentle giant, remembered for his "lactic build-up on the home stretch", shot to stardom by running the first sub-46 seconds 400 metres in history after clocking 44.6 seconds in the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki.

He was yesterday remembered as a man who was born to run, who, given the chance, preferred running to walking to the extent that when unable to race fellow human beings, he took to competing against the four-legged variety on his family's farm.

McKenley's eldest daughter Laura, in remembering her father yesterday, said he was a loving parent, an 'exasperating husband' at times and a disciplinarian to boot.

"I would like us to remember my father as one of those rare persons who won the world but never lost his soul," she said feelingly.

Prime Minister Bruce Golding, referring to the man who was coach, mentor, motivator and "friend to all", said McKenley had brought "great pride to the country" and marked the

beginning of Jamaica's impressive performance in international athletics.

"Herb McKenley was at the centre of that beginning," Golding said. He said the government, in honour of the sporting icon, would be erecting a life-sized statue of McKenley at the entrance to the National Stadium and would be finding other ways to honour him as well.

But while McKenley will be immortalised in that fashion, former prime minister, PJ Patterson, who eulogised the sportsman, said McKenley in his 44.6 seconds run in Helsinki had been immortalised from then.

"After 55 years no one can forget that blistering pace in the 3rd leg in Helsinki. No one ever will. For, in 44.6 seconds, he earned his immortality," Patterson said.

"Had he departed entirely from the world of track and field after the zenith of Helsinki, Herb would still have earned a unique place in the pantheon of athletic superstars," Patterson added.

Noting that McKenley in his time had to compete on dirt tracks and without the aid of modern technology and equipment, Patterson said, "the accomplishments when examined in the context of time and circumstances will be

etched indelibly in the annals of the nation and preserved forever in the archives of international sports".

Throughout the more than four-hour-long affair, not many tears flowed, a seeming testimony to the well-lived life of the 85-year-old Olympian who passed away on November 26. His widow Beverly smiled bravely, hauntingly silent, bearing her grief proudly and supported by their children who bore their pain in the eyes they inherited from their father.

Fellow track legend Donald Quarrie, representing the dozens of athletes who paid their final respects to McKenley, said his memory of Herb surrounded his "deep compassion for his family, athletics and the athletes of Jamaica".

In a tribute from McKenley's alma mater, Calabar High School in Kingston, which has benefited from his tutelage for some 70 years, he was hailed as the institution's 'most illustrious son'; one whose greatness or humility was "never in question".

President of the Jamaica Olympic Association Mike Fennell said it was up to "those left behind to ensure that the rich legacy he has left and the values he epitomised are not forgotten and are used for the benefit

of generations to come".

In a contemplative sermon filled with memories of times shared with McKenley, the Reverend Dr Horace Russell concluded "how we run is important".

He said McKenley's race from starting block to finish was a testament and living example to all Jamaicans and people everywhere.

Among the famed athletes, Calabar old boys, students and former Olympians in attendance were former prime minister and Opposition Leader Portia Simpson Miller, Governor General Sir Kenneth Hall and wife Rheima Hall, Transport Minister Lester 'Mike' Henry, President of the Senate Oswald Harding and Mayor of Kingston Senator Desmond McKenzie.

"Herb really had a good race," one fellow Olympian observed as he watched the flag-draped coffin borne on the shoulders of the Jamaica Constabulary's Guard of Honour disappear into the National Arena for one last time, followed by athletes he trained.

As the last rays of the sun slid from Kingston's night sky, McKenley was lowered into the ground at the National Heroes Park in the parish, taking his place among many of Jamaica's greats.

He is survived by his widow Beverley, his children Laura, Herbert, Kirsten, Michael, Alissa and step-daughter Yanick and brother Dudley.