

B/M-McKENLEY, HERB
McKenley – a truly great Jamaican

ON MONDAY evening, I was in my bedroom watching one of my favourite western movies when my wife shouted to me from the sitting room: "Tony, Tony, Herb McKenley is dead".

"What?" I shouted back.

"Herb McKenley is dead. It just came on the news," she replied.

A lump rose in my throat, goose pimples covered my skin and I closed my eyes for a few moments.

Herb had been ailing for some time so obviously it was not a surprise. It was, nevertheless, a shock. Although he was ill for some time, McKenley was one of those men who were so great you almost believed he could never die and that he would live forever.

THE GREATEST

As an athlete, a track and field athlete, he was the greatest this country has ever produced. As a sportsman, he was, along with cricketer George Headley, numbered among the two greatest this country has ever produced. As far as the whole wide world is concerned, he is, all things considered, from the 100 metres to the 400m, arguably the greatest sprinter of all time.

In winning a silver medal in the 100m at the Helsinki Olympics in 1952, in winning silver medals in the 400m at both the London Olympics in 1948 and the Helsinki Olympics, Herb, who lost the short sprint in a controversial photo-finish to American Lindy Remigino and the one-lap events in two surprise results to countrymen Arthur Wint and George Rhoden, never won an individual gold medal at the Olympic Games.

However, in becoming the first man to run the 400m under 46 seconds, in breaking the world record for the 440 yards and the 400m on a number of occasions, in becoming the only man in the history of the Olympic Games to reach the finals of the 100, 200 and the 400m, and after finishing in fourth position in the 200 in London, after also becoming the only man in the history of the Games to win medals in both the 100 and the 400, McKenley, who won a gold medal in Jamaica's world record-breaking run in the 4x400m relay in Helsinki, left behind a record almost second to none – and especially so after his magnificent run in that relay.

After losing the 400 race once again, after failing to deliver twice in his pet event, after that one black mark on his illustrious career and left with one last chance to win a gold medal at the Olympic Games, McKenley, grabbing the baton on the third leg from Les Laing 15 metres behind Charlie Moore of the U.S. ran the race of his life and, after clocking an amazing, an unbelievable 44.6 seconds, handed Rhoden the baton one stride ahead of Mal Whitfield. The rest is history.

That golden run, in a word record 3:03.9 on Sunday, July 27, is best appreciated when it is remembered that Wint clocked 46.8, Laing 47.00, Rhoden 45.5, and that Moore, the man who McKenley

chased and caught in the race of his life, was going great guns at 46.3.

To me, however, McKenley's greatness went beyond the track. Very few who were so great in the arena contributed so much away from it as McKenley did as a coach to Calabar High School and to Jamaica.

As a motivator to Jamaican athletes from all walks of life and as an administrator in Jamaica and while serving the International Association of Athletics Federations, McKenley was one of a kind – the kind who inspired others to greatness, who opened the doors of opportunity to others so that they may also achieve, and who gave of his time and his money to those in need.

I will never ever forget that rainy night at the airport in Canton, China, in 1973 when, with the Jamaica table tennis team stuck because of the weather, the Chinese liaison officer for the Jamaica team came to me and started asking questions about Jamaica.

He asked every question possible before asking me where did table tennis, as a sport, rank in Jamaica? I ticked them off as cricket first – in those days – followed by football, and by the time I had finished saying track and field, the little Chinese man shouted, "Ah, McKenley, Wint, Helsinki, 1952."

This was the man who did not know where in the world Jamaica was located, did not know whether Jamaica was hot or cold and did not know who the prime minister of Jamaica was.

I will also never forget that day some five or six years ago, when, after the Rotary Club of Kingston had made a presentation to McKenley at one of its regular monthly luncheons at a New Kingston hotel, when, after the president of the club had asked for friends of the members to stand and be introduced, a visitor got up and introduced himself. The visitor was uninvited.

MEMORIES

According to him, he was from Finland, he was at the stadium in Helsinki in 1952 when McKenley ran that memorable relay leg, he had vowed on that day that one day he would visit the land of McKenley the land that produced McKenley – he had finally made it.

He was at the luncheon because he read in the newspapers that morning that McKenley was being honoured at a luncheon and he decided to buy a ticket and, after all the years, say thank you to the man who ran the greatest race he had ever seen.

To the Honourable Herbert McKenley, O.J., O.M., thank you for all the memories, for your unforgettable contribution (on and off the track) to Jamaica's greatness in the field of sports, and for your assistance in the development of so many Jamaicans, on and off the track.

You will be remembered as a truly great Jamaican.



Tony Becca

FROM THE BOUNDARY

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