



"Like a golf ball down a concrete road"—University of Illinois' young man from Jamaica demonstrates his speed. The alligator shoes, a McKenley trade-mark, are made-to-order in London.

EDWARD FERNEY

Tall, Tan and Terrific

By WILLIAM CULLEN FAY

Called "the brown blur" and "the typhoon of the Indies," sporting a Basil Rathbone accent and a remarkable mustache, banana-bred Herbert McKenley is track's newest sensation.

A LOT of adjectives have flowed under the typewriters since Leo Johnson went to work for the University of Illinois in 1937. The squat, graying track coach has been called dynamic, effervescent, loquacious, garrulous and gusty, but nobody ever accused him of being inarticulate until Herb McKenley rocked 440 yards in 46.2 seconds last June first. And then, strangely enough, it was Johnson himself who leveled the charge.

A simple question stopped the man of a few thousand polysyllables: "Say, coach, how does this McKenley run?"

Leo thoughtfully considered the dusky north rim of Illinois Memorial Stadium. He scuffed the wet cinders over which McKenley fled to the new world record for the quarter mile. "Well, Herb sort of floats along . . . spikes rely brushing the ground and" —Leo grinned at the reporters—"no,

that's not right. I can't describe it. Beats anything I've ever seen. Herbie really stalls my vocabulary."

Here was the elocutional equivalent of Casey at the Bat. Johnson, mighty Johnson, had struck out. The situation worsened when Illinois won the National Collegiate title at Minnesota. McKenley ran away with the 220 and 440 dashes and anchored the victorious mile-relay team.

Then the reporters really ganged up on Loquacious Leo. What about this tall, tan and terrific McKenley? Are there any more at home like him down in British Jamaica? How come he suddenly appears at Illinois and clips two seconds off the record Ben Eastman, of Stanford, set way back in 1932?

"Boys," said Leo, "he's just a brown blur." The phrase was picturesque and alliterative. It satisfied the reporters, but not Johnson's conscience. Leo merely was plagiarizing the gap of a West Point

cadet—two weeks previously, McKenley had zipped the 220 in 20.8 against Army, only one half second slower than the world mark.

Johnson needed something more explicit than "brown blur" for his summer swing around the banquet circuit. The alumni were going to a plenty of questions. Provisionally, the answer came suddenly—like McKenley in the stretch a few days later on the sixteenth tee of a Chicago golf course. Leo invested a brand-new ball in a 200 yard drive and—"whoo-o-osh!" The ball hooked crazily, landed out of bounds on a dog-leg of United States highway. Leo shaded his eyes and smilingly watched \$1.25 skip toward Evanston.

"What's so funny?" his partner asked. Leo teed up another \$1.25. "I've just discovered how McKenley runs—like a golf ball down a concrete road."

During the next few months, the man who runs like a golf ball will bounce before the largest crowds in track history. This is a lush sports era and McKenley has stirred the imagination and pocketbook of the fans like nobody since Cornelius Warmerdam pole-vaulted fifteen feet, seven and three-quarters inches. The promoters are counting on Herb to produce box-office bonanzas—and record times—in the big indoor meets at New York, Boston and Chicago.

The promoters are not a bit downhearted because McKenley's most persistent challenger is another Jamaican Negro, Lloyd La Beach, now a student of agriculture at the University of Wisconsin. Lloyd and Herb grew up together in the same neighborhood in Kingston. The fans are mighty curious about this track typhoon from the West Indies. They're wondering—since both McKenley and La Beach are British subjects—whether the typhoon will blow away United States track supremacy in the Olympic games next year.

McKenley debunks that idea in an accent that out-Rathbone Basil. "Track is quite popular in our country, surprisingly so. But we don't have the coaching or competition to produce quantities of outstanding trackmen yet. Ordinarily, Lloyd and I would have gone to school in England, but the war changed that. Probably wouldn't have run a bit at Cambridge. I've had a spot of luck as it turned out."

Incidentally, Herb's clipped diction, which matches his mustache, slowed an outstanding Midwest runner early last spring. This 440 man, who was burdened with more thigh muscles than gray cells, confronted Herb before their race and said in Amos 'n' Andy dialect, "Are you the great McKenley, sho 'nuff?"

McKenley twinkled, "Most decidedly, old fellow." And then, after Herb broke a meet record to win by twenty yards, he remarked, "A bit of hot work, what?"

It never occurred to Herb that there was anything unusual about his being a runner until he encountered American reporters, who treated him like a fugitive from Xavier Cugat. He was asked if it was true he was going on the stage with Katherine Dunham. Patiently, Herb explained there wasn't a Calypso singer in his whole relationship and Jamaica wasn't Trinidad.

Herb's seventy-four-year-old father, Alexander Givans McKenley, is a well-to-do Kingston physician who received his degree from Edinburgh University. Naturally, McKenley, Sr., wanted Herb to become a doctor, but Mrs. McKenley wanted a violinist in the family.

Herb started on the violin at the age of twelve and studied so zealously that he is now a champion quarter miler. Of course, his fabulous appetite and fondness for bananas had something to do with it. The violin teacher lived two and a half miles away and Herb discovered he could trot the distance faster than riding the poky, meandering busses. And there was an added consideration. The pennies saved on round-trip fares bought prodigious quantities of bananas, mangoes and papayas in the markets. Very soon, Herb was clamoring for six lessons weekly instead of three, and his mother, deeply gratified by this yearning for higher things, made the arrangements which doubled the young maestro's banana consumption.

Herb fiddled for his fruit for three years; then a part-time office-boy job (Continued on Page 149)

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opened up in the Colonial Secretary's office and, coincidentally, Herb renounced the violin. There is no record of his teacher saying that the world lost another Kreisler.

However, the daily five-mile jog over the hills and down the back streets of Kingston had built up a pair of slender, sinewy legs. Also, Herb had learned to run with something in his hands—the decoy violin. Carrying a baton, which many runners consider an impediment, never bothered Herb. At the Penn Relays last spring, when Herb made up five yards in the anchor lap to win the mile for Illinois, Johnson confessed, "I was worried for a while, Herbie."

"You really shouldn't have, you know," Herb replied. "I could have made it with my violin." Johnson thinks maybe he could have, at that.

McKenley's track career might have died among the card indexes and cross files of the secretary's office but for the insistence of Calabar High School teachers that all students participate in a varsity sport. "If you didn't," Herb recalls, "they forced you to perform exercises—push-ups and all sorts of sweaty routines. Naturally, I wasn't for that. I favored cricket, but was a frightful bowler, so track it was."

The reluctant quarter miler never accomplished anything in high school which hinted at world records to come. His best time was an unspectacular 51.6. The war was on when nineteen-year-old Herb was graduated from Calabar in 1941. Regretfully, he postponed continuing his studies at Cambridge and settled down again in the secretary's office, scarcely cheered by a promotion from office boy to junior clerk.

Then came the first of two chance meetings which made McKenley a champion. Another Herb named Kerns, the national intercollegiate 440 champion, visited Jamaica and was matched against McKenley at 220 yards. Kerns'

21.3 edged out McKenley's 21.6, but the American recognized the explosive possibilities in the Jamaican's resilient eight-foot stride. "All you need is competition," Kerns said, then prophetically, "You ought to go up to the States to college, and you ought to concentrate on the four-forty."

Herb broached the idea to his father, who mentioned it to his friends among the Jesuit missionaries, who communicated with their colleagues on the Boston College faculty. Briefly, that's how a promising Episcopalian quarter miler from Jamaica received a scholarship to a Catholic college in Massachusetts in the fall of 1942.

Herb's arrival did not revolutionize the New England track industry, but it did contribute slightly to the field day enjoyed by ticket scalpers at the annual Boston College-Holy Cross Donnybrook. After viewing the mediocre season opener, Herb concluded football was a dull and baffling substitute for soccer. He gave his book of tickets to an itinerant janitor.

Then friendly students lured the diffident, skinny Jamaican into their non-time touch-football battles, and Herb quickly developed a liking for the sport which rivaled his earlier love for the violin and bananas. "I never did find the chap I'd given my season's pass to," he recalls. "Consequently, I had to shell out fifteen bucks for an end-zone seat for Holy Cross."

Now that last statement may sound out of character with Herb's Rathbonish diction, but it simply shows how quickly the King's English can rub off against campus colloquialism. "For a bit," Herb says, "I couldn't understand the other chaps and they couldn't understand me. I was always a sentence behind. Very soon, though, I heard one of the chaps remark, 'That McKenley certainly learned how to speak English in a hurry.'"

Herb didn't run in competition until the National Collegiate meet in the spring of 1944. Then occurred the second chance encounter which profoundly influenced his track career.

After finishing second, a stride in front of Bob Kelley, of Illinois, in the 440, Herb went to the movies with Buddy Young, the Negro sprinter and football star who was Kelley's sidekick. Buddy said, "Herb, if you ever get tired of Boston College, come out to Illinois."

Frankly, McKenley already was tired of Boston College, where track was in the wartime doldrums. Illinois—with a naval-training program supplementing Johnson's top-notch coaching—was irresistibly attractive. Herb was in Champaign when the 1944 fall semester opened.

Johnson decided Herb needed plenty of distance work to increase his endurance. No 440 dashes for a while. Herb worked the next twelve months with the cross-country squad, jogging five miles a day.

Finally, one brisk November afternoon, Johnson took Herb onto the stadium cinders, pointed out the 440 distance and produced a stop watch. "Make it good," Leo ordered.

McKenley did. After Herb stopped bouncing, he asked for the time. Johnson pocketed the watch and said, "Pretty fair, pretty fair. You can forget that cross-country stuff for a while."

Then Johnson hustled downtown to have the stop watch checked. He didn't quite believe the reading: forty-seven seconds.

"Af'er that," Leo confesses, "I could scarcely wait for the indoor season to open. I had a real champion ready to go."

McKenley is strictly a front runner, in the sense that he goes all out from the first stride, builds his lead and saves no finishing kick. "I run as fast as I can as long as I can," he explains. "That means the other chaps can't pocket me; they have to beat me in the stretch."

One runner, Elmore Harris, of the New Jersey Shore Athletic Club, performed that feat last year. Elmore did it in the N.A.A.U. meet at Dallas. McKenley's teammates will tell you that Herb never has mentioned the treacherous starting hole—left unrepaired from an earlier race—which caught his spikes and threw him off stride fifty yards from the tape. They'll also tell you that one week later, in Triboro Stadium, Randall's Island, New York, McKenley and Harris met again at 300 yards. Herb won in 29.8, shattering the 30.2 world record set by Charley Paddock in 1921.

The moment Johnson had been waiting for arrived on February 16, 1946, in the indoor opener against Ohio State. McKenley made his 440 debut in 49.3, a meet and Illinois armory record. Next week, he fractured the Michigan Field House record in 49.7 and was running eased up to save the spurt which won the decisive anchor lap in the concluding mile relay by a stride.

The slender 52½ to 51½ team triumph also was a personal victory for Johnson, who, the afternoon before, proved to his runners and skeptical reporters that the Wolverines couldn't lose. Leo chalked the entire meet on a blackboard. His prediction was: Michigan, 57; Illinois, 50. Inasmuch as Johnson, the previous spring, had demonstrated just as conclusively that the Illini couldn't win the Big Ten title—they did—you can understand why opposing coaches start worrying when loquacious Leo goes on a blackboard bender.

McKenley's anchor 440, aside from winning the meet, forced Johnson to make another hurried stop-watch check. Hale Newcomer, the timer, called,

"Forty-seven and seven tenths!" as Herbsnapped the tape. Johnsonyelled, "That can't be right!"

But it was. If you're wondering why that performance—almost two seconds slower than the record McKenley later established outdoors—startled Johnson, remember Herb was running on an oval indoor track. He was negotiating two turns instead of the long straightaway and one pivot required on outdoor cinders. As it was, he finished four tenths of a second under the American indoor mark of 48.1, which he equaled a fortnight later in the Big Ten meet in University of Chicago Field House. Because of his running start picked up during the baton transfer, Herb wasn't credited with the 47.7.

The conference meet also reunited McKenley and his old chum, La Beach,

Johnson, as usual, came up with the best means of identification. "McKenley," he said, "was the one with the mustache who won by a whisker."

Track fans who intend to patronize the indoor meets should earmark that identification. Also, there's one other unmistakable McKenley trade-mark when Herb runs on cinders—his bench-made shoes. They are square-toed, cut from feathery-light alligator skin, and grip with four steel spikes instead of six. Envious competitors, who blamed slower times on their standard round-toed, leather, six-spike shoes, couldn't find anything comparable to McKenley's de-luxe models. And no wonder. A London shoemaker made Herb's just before the outbreak of the war.

"He's promised a second pair sometime this year," Herb says. "There wasn't much alligator skin in England

WHEN DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE WAS SIGNED AND JUST OPENED FOR THE RELAYS. BOYS READY FOR ACTION TOMORROW. REGARDER. HERB.

The boys were ready. With McKenley running anchor, they won the mile, 440 and sprint-medley relays. Ironically, they lost the 880 relay—and the honor of being the third team in fifty-two years to sweep the meet—when McKenley dropped a baton pass from Jack Pierce. Herb picked up the stick and won the trial beat by twenty yards, but the officials disqualified the Illini because Herb's left foot stepped out of bounds in the passing zone.

In Herb's Philadelphia telegram, you probably detected glints of the quiet humor which makes him the most popular athlete on the squad—and the whole campus. The Daily Illini's student poll named him Athlete of the Year for 1946. There's nothing hot-footish about Herb's shumor. It's quiet, restrained, goes over best in a song.

Hilarious highlight of every track trip is the pre-meet recital by McKenley, Young, Buddy Mathis, the national intercollegiate 100-yard-dash champion, and George Walker, the Big Ten high and low hurdles titleholder. The four Negroes call themselves the Ink Blots.

McKenley's physique qualifies for the high-note role made famous by the Ink Spots' stringbean soloist. But nature fashioned McKenley into a baritone, so Young plays tenor while Herb booms the bullfrog monologues that trademark Ink Spot recordings. His Oxonian "C'mere, honey chile" is a guaranteed laugh relaxer of locker-room nerves.

Of course, the Bouncing Baritone stumbles on a low note occasionally. Despite these musical missteps, Hopalong Herbert will continue to beat everybody in spiked shoes at 220, 300 and 440 yards for the next two years. That's the emphatic opinion of shrewd Leo Johnson, and Leo is never wrong, except when he predicts Illini track defeats. "Not only will Herb continue to win, but he'll be a threat to break a record every time he runs. I expect him to lower his four-forty and three-hundred marks within six months, and I wouldn't be surprised if he cracked the two-twenty too. He's the most versatile runner extant."

There are two reasons for Johnson's enthusiasm. One, Herb summered in his native Kingston, returned to the campus rested and heavier, with this report: "Father removed my tonsils in August and I felt immensely better immediately. There was a slight infection which bothered me last year. Father says I should gain about ten pounds, which will make me about a hundred and seventy-five. I can carry it easily and it should help my kick in the last forty of the four-forty." Reason Two, there's a girl in Boston, Sylvia Francis, who was Herb's high-school date in Kingston. Sylvia is working for a teacher's degree at Marlborough College and waiting for Herb to run in Boston. "I always run a little faster when Sylvia's watching," Herb says. "If I don't break a record in the Millrose Games, I'll never break one."

Sylvia has a prominent place in Herb's future plans, which are a bit more comprehensive than broken track records. Herb's plans include: A physical-education degree from Illinois; a coaching job in Kingston; Sylvia; Herb McKenley II; a home with plenty of banana and papaya trees in the back yard; and one violin teacher two and a half miles away.

THE END



who had followed a strange and devious path to the halls of learning at Wisconsin. La Beach, Sr., a wealthy plantation owner, thought Lloyd should become familiar with American agricultural methods—preferably, the hard way. Lloyd signed on as foreman of a Jamaican pea-picking crew bound for the States. The crew eventually worked down to within forty miles—or "seven billion peas" as Lloyd puts it—of Madison. The foreman took a day off to visit the Badgers' campus, liked it, and inquired the whereabouts of the registrar's office.

Which explains how the pea-picking progeny of a Jamaican planter and the Episcopal protégé of Jamaican Catholic missionaries happened to be battling down the 440 stretch in the University of Chicago Field House a scant stride apart. From the bleacher seats it was impossible to distinguish between the whizzing Negroes. Both were skinny, slightly over six feet, within a few pounds of 160.

during the war, you know. I hope he hurries. I need another pair badly."

Meanwhile, if you're an autograph hound and you happen to see a slender, smiling Negro hustling along, an alligator shoe sticking out of each coat pocket, grab him. That's McKenley en route to a track meet. Herb doesn't trust his only pair of shoes to luggage and porters—not since his bag was mislaid for three hours before the Penn Relays last spring. Of course, that wasn't the only mishap. Herb described the trip vividly in a telegram to the daily Illini, the campus paper:

ARRIVED 7 P.M. TRIP GOOD AND STEADY LIKE HIGH POWERED AUTOMOBILE. GONZALEZ WAS WORRIED FOR A WHILE SO HE HAD CUP READY FOR ACTION IF NECESSARY. MATHIS YELLED GEE WHEN PLANE DIPPED. WALKER HAD UPSET STOMACH. MCKENLEY WAS CALM AS USUAL. JOKE RAINING HERE. HAD A TOUCH OF PHILADELPHIA HOSPITALITY. PENN RELAY MANAGEMENT RESERVED ROOMS FOR US IN A TWO BIT FLOP HOUSE. COACH JOHNSON FIT TO BE TIED. PLACE MUST HAVE BEEN CLOSED