



Honourable Herbert Henry McKenley, OJ, CD

Mr Chancellor: Jamaica is famous for its herbs. Some of them go by various exotic aliases. Some of them just go. One such is the one whom we honour now, and who is always and everywhere simply Herb. I present the Honourable Herbert Henry McKenley, Member of the Order of Jamaica, Commander of the Order of Distinction, a meteor of the running track, whose brilliance still sets memory alight.

From his earliest years he had good coaches. There was his mother – a loving mother, but a strict disciplinarian, and he sometimes found it advisable to put swift distance between himself and her. There was also his maternal grandfather. Whenever some other young boy came calling at the gate, he would issue a challenge – that his grandson could beat the other boy in a race from the gate to the house. The reward was a coin, and Herb, having also acquired from early a healthy regard for a good deal, always won.

At Calabar High School he found his first role model in athletics, in the person of his senior Arthur Wint. Later, as team mates and in competition against each other, they would enthral the world and write Jamaica's name in the record books.

In 1942 Herb was awarded an athletics scholarship to Boston College. His father was a doctor and Herb decided to follow in his footsteps. But running was in his blood. He virtually completed his "pre-med" studies, except for some lab sessions. He would set up his experiment and ask a classmate to keep an eye on it for half an hour or so while he went for a little run. But eventually the classmate would have to turn off the experiment, because Herb was still out there somewhere, running. And so he ran his way out of medicine and into history.

In 1945 McKenley transferred from Boston College to the University of Illinois, at the inducement of the great Illinois coach Leo Johnson, the man who persuaded Herb that he had it in him to become a world champion. The rest, as they say, is history.

In 1946 Herb won four medals, including one gold, at the fifth Central American and Caribbean Games at Baranquilla. On 28 June 1947, at Berkeley, he became the first athlete from the English-speaking Caribbean to set a time or distance measured world record, when he ran the quarter-mile in 46.3 seconds. On 2 July 1948, at Milwaukee, he became the first person to run the 400 metres in less than 46 seconds. In 1950, at the Sixth Central American and Caribbean Games, in Guatemala City, he took silver in the 100 metres and the 4x100 relay, and gold in the 200 and 400 metres. In 1951 he was the entire Jamaican delegation to the First Pan American Games, in Buenos Aires, and, although suffering from influenza, brought home bronze medals in the 100, 200 and 400 metres – the first and only time that a male athlete has won medals in all three sprints at the same major games.

But the test which any world-class athlete cherishes most is the Olympics. In the London Olympics of 1948, when he placed second to Arthur Wint in the 400 metres, they became the first two male athletes from a country other than the United States to take the gold and silver medals in the same sprint event. However, they were to suffer a cruel turn of luck in the 4x400 relay when McKenley, waiting to take the baton from Wint for the final leg, watched helplessly as the long-striding giant pulled up lame. Still, the Helsinki Olympics lay ahead.

When McKenley arrived at Helsinki in 1952, he was still not fully recovered from an attack of mumps. But his manhood was not to be so easily outdone. In the 100 metres, he surprised most people by placing second in a controversial photo-finish. To this day there are persons who are convinced that he won that race. In the 400 metres he again took the silver medal, this time behind his team mate George Rhoden.

Then came the 4x400 relay. When, running the third leg, he received the baton some twelve to fifteen metres behind Charlie Moore of the USA, the dream seemed all but lost. But then he heard, in his head, the voice of Leo Johnson, from five years earlier, when he had failed to overtake another great American, Mal Whitfield, in another relay race. Johnson had said, "Herb, you made an error. Next time do it a little at a time."

From that moment, the oppressive fixation on the difficulty of catching Moore was lifted, and he gave himself up to the running. He overtook Moore in the change-over box and handed George Rhoden a one-metre lead, which Rhoden held, just held, until the end. Jamaica set a new world record of 3 minutes 3.9 secs., which beat the twenty-year record held by the United States by more than four seconds, and which was to last for eight years. McKenley's leg was timed at an incredible 44.6 secs. According to the noted sports writer and historian Jimmy Carnegie, "This [victory] is arguably still the greatest single feat in all Caribbean sport," and "Herb's leg is regarded as one of the greatest relay legs of all time."

Herb McKenley's outstanding contribution to athletics did not end when he hung up his running shoes. Since then he has been a tireless worker for the cause of the sport, at both local and international levels, as coach and administrator, but most crucially as encourager and inspirer of succeeding generations of athletes, making them believe in themselves, securing scholarships for them, opening doors for them by virtue of the international goodwill and reputation which he enjoys.

Since 1954 he has been Coach/Manager of Jamaica's Track and Field teams. He has been Coach of the West Indies Federation Olympic team, the Western Hemisphere Track and Field team against Europe, the Rest of the World team against the Soviet Union and the USA, and the Americas' World Cup Track and Field team.

That honours continue to be bestowed on him is a sign of his enduring fame and popularity. In addition to the Jamaican national honours which he holds, he is Honorary Life President of the Jamaica Amateur Athletic Association. He has been inducted into Jamaica's Sports Hall of Fame, the Black Sports Hall of Fame of the USA, and the Hall of Fame of the University of Pennsylvania Relays. He has been the recipient of the Order of Merit of the International Olympic Committee, as well as of the Norman Manley Award for Excellence.

Only the winged words of our laureate poet Walcott can match the winged heels of our laurelled Olympian:

Greater than poetry is the metre of the athlete
Since their glory is brief, and swifter than any song.
They turn into birds, they are stretching to leave the earth,
But let them stay green as the Olympian laurel
In the kindest of wars, the games, man's happiest quarrel.

The book *Herb McKenley Olympic Star*, by Townsend, Carnegie and McKenley, ends like this: "... Herb, now in his 50s, is still on the run ... as an insurance salesman running after clients, running (twice unsuccessfully) for political office. You get the impression he'll never stop." That was in 1974. Now, twenty years later, he stops just long enough for us to make him hear once more the sweet surge of the crowd's applause bringing him home.

Long ago, when he was a boy in Pleasant Valley, in the parish of Clarendon, the village folk used to call him "Little Doc." Tonight, Chancellor, I ask you to speak the magic words which will turn him into "Big Doc," as, by the authority vested in you by the Council and Senate of this University, you confer upon the finest Herb the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.

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Mona Campus.