

## Deon on Top in Atlanta



Pioneers like Cynthia Thompson, Una Morris and Rosie Allwood paved the way for a new generation led by Merlene Ottey to win track and field medals at the highest level. However, the honour of being the first Jamaican woman to win an Olympic gold fell to Deon Hemmings-McCatty, a determined 400 metre hurdler. Unheralded at high school, she beat the world in style at the 1996 Olympics.

The magical moment came on July 31 in Atlanta and for most observers, it came against the odds.

Hemmings had paid her dues in finals at the 1992 Olympics and the 1993 World Championships and a surge gave her the bronze at the 1995 Worlds with a national record of 53.48 seconds.

The Brown's Town native was not favoured in Atlanta. Ahead of her in the World Championships were long time American rivals Kim Batten and Tonja Buford with times - 52.61 and 52.62 seconds - that blasted the world record of 52.74 seconds. Hemmings pulled into the fast lane with an Olympic record 52.99 seconds in her semi-final, a certain sign that she was in top gear.

Speaking last week, Deon put her first sub-53 run in perspective. "That race was sweeter than the gold because at least I ran sub-53 so I knew that I was on the right track", she analysed. The old mark was 53.17 seconds by 1988 winner Debbie Flintoff-King of Australia.

The real test found the Jamaica in lane 4, flanked by Buford and Batten and she tested them with her speed to hurdle 8.

Batten moved forward to challenge the woman pegged as a 20-1 shot for the gold but the outsider in black-green-and-gold zoomed away and crossed the finish line, arms aloft, a metre clear. Coached by American Bev Kearney, Hemmings had produced another Olympic record, 52.82 seconds to reverse the result of the 1995 World Championships.

Hemmings did her victory lap in the company of compatriot Debbie-Ann Parris who had set a personal best of her own - 53.97 seconds - in fourth position. Together, Hemmings and Parris, both past students of Vere Technical High, had established a benchmark. Never before had two Jamaicans reached the Olympic 400 metre hurdles final and it would not happen again until 2016 when Ristananna Tracey, Leah Nugent and Janieve Russell came 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> at the Games in Rio de Janeiro.

The long quest for gold had started in 1948 when Thompson went to the London Olympics as a co-favourite in the 100 metres but fell ill on the long banana boat ride to England for those Games. Thanks to Deon, the quest was over.