

Miller Leads Jamaican Sprint Fest In Mexico



We take for granted now that Jamaica will be a factor in the sprints whenever major championships are staged. Things were quite different after Herb McKenley narrowly lost the 100 metres gold medal in the 1952 Olympics as Jamaica had no finalists in the 100 or 200 metres in the 1956, 1960 or 1964 Olympics.

Lennox 'Billy' Miller changed all that. Brilliant at Boys Championships for Kingston College, Miller grew in speed and stature at the famed University of Southern California and entered the Olympic year ranked number 3 in the world for 1967 by the respected US journal TRACK AND FIELD NEWS. In 1968, he blasted his way to the NCAA title in 10.1 seconds and set his sights on Mexico City and an Olympic showdown with the two Americans ranked above him, Jim Hines and Charlie Greene who had beaten him to the 1967 NCAA title.

He and the fast starting Greene cruised into the final, with the American winning their semi, 10.13 to 10.15 seconds. Hines had won the first semi in 10.08. Assigned to lanes 3 and 4 respectively in the final on October 14, Hines and Miller accelerated to cover the bullet-quick getaway by the third American Mel Pender in lane 5. Once they covered Pender, Hines pulled away to win in 9.95 seconds, the first electronically timed run under 10 seconds.

Miller was clocked in 10.04, a Jamaican record that would last until 1989, whilst Greene was third.

Then just 22, Miller had returned Jamaican sprinting to a stage from which it would seldom be absent. He took the bronze four years later and since then, Jamaica has placed at least one man in the Olympic 100 metres final, on all but one occasion.

However, the Jamaican sprint fest in Mexico was not finished. Errol Stewart, 200 metre finalists Mike Fray, in-form 400 metres man Clifton Forbes and Miller equalled the 4x100 metres relay world record of 38.65 seconds in the heats and went even faster - 38.39 - in the semi-final. Sadly, the makeshift nature of the team led to a bad exchange in the final and a fourth place finish. Still, they had built a template for brilliant sprinting by generations of Jamaicans to come.

His daughter Inger won Olympic gold in 1996 as part of the USA 4x100 metres relay team, making them the first father-daughter duo to win Olympic track and field medals. That was a prologue to her finest moment in the sport, a peerless display at the 1999 World Championships. Second to Marion Jones in the 100 metres, Miller zoomed to the gold medal in the 200 metres with a sensational time of 21.77 seconds, with Jamaicans Beverley McDonald and Merlene Fraser second and third.

Lennox 'Billy' Miller died of cancer in 2004 but his super run in Mexico remains an important landmark in the history of Jamaican athletics.

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