

PODIUM FOR KERR IN 1960



By the best accounts, Jamaica has won 78 Olympic medals with all but one gained in track and field. Look a little closer and you find that on September 2, 1960, Jamaica's George Kerr continued the work of the great Arthur Wint with a bronze medal, outside that big number, in the 800 metres. Kerr, a smooth running master of both the 400 and 800 metres, is the last Jamaican to win an Olympic medal in the two-lap event.

Wint had won Olympic silver medals in 1948 and 1952 and Kerr looked like he too would go to the podium when the 1960 Games were held in Rome, Italy. Discovered by Ben Francis in Hanover, Kerr reached the final by winning his heat, quarterfinal and semi.

In that race, the Jamaican set an Olympic record of 1 minute 47.26 seconds. He ran comfortably in third at the bell and primed a move at the top of the back straight. A battle for space drove him wide and allowed Belgium's Roger Moen, holder of the world record, and New Zealander Peter Snell to sneak away. Snell overtook Moen to win with Kerr finishing strongly to secure Jamaica's third Olympic medal in the 800 metres.

Later in those Games, Kerr anchored his team to the bronze medals in the 4x400 metres relay. However, these brilliant achievements are held out of the 78 medal total as Kerr and his Jamaican teammates competed in 1960 as part of a British West Indies Federation team. His 4x400 metres colleagues were Barbadian Jim Wedderburn and the Jamaican pair of Mal Spence and 110 metre hurdles finalist Keith Gardner. Their time – 3:04.00 - was just a tick off the winning world record time by Wint, Les Laing, Herb McKenley and George Rhoden eight years earlier in 1952.

Brilliant in big meets, Kerr was fourth in the 800 metres in 1964 with a personal best time, 1:45.8, that is still in the all-time Jamaican top ten. Remarkably, Jamaica's only other Olympic 800 metre finalist is Kenia Sinclair who achieved the honour in 2008.

Consistent and fast, the quiet Jamaican was ranked at number 3 in 1959, 1960 and 1961 by the respected US journal TRACK AND FIELD NEWS and at number 4 in 1964. In addition, he was NCAA champion for the University of Illinois in 1959 and 1960. In the following season, he clocked the fastest two lap time in the world - 1 minute 46.4 seconds.

His 400 metres credentials are substantial as well. They include gold medals at the Commonwealth and Pan-Am Games and a national record equalling lifetime best of 45.7 seconds.

Later to become the founding headmaster at Vere Technical, Francis first saw Kerr's huge athletic potential when he went to pick up Kerr's older brother for a sporting engagement. As the team vehicle pulled away, young Kerr set off in pursuit. His determined pursuit impressed Francis, who was a trained physical education teacher, and knew talent when he saw it.

Kerr died from a heart condition in 2012 but left behind a legacy of excellence in a discipline in which Jamaica was once among the best in the world.

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