

WORLD RECORD! MARILYN NEUFVILLE



When Marilyn Neufville settled into her blocks for the 400 metre final on July 23 at the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, the 17 year-old Portland native had the world on her shoulders. She shrugged off the pressure and raced into history. Neufville won by a city block and stopped the clock at 51.02 seconds, a world record by seven tenths of a second.

Australian Sandra Brown was well beaten in second place with a time of 53.66 seconds.

50 years later, Neufville still stands alone. The teenager from Port Antonio blasted the old mark of 51.72 seconds into oblivion and while our women in black-green-and-gold have excelled in athletics, no one else has set an official 400m world outdoor record.

The Edinburgh performance, and perhaps her strength to endure enormous controversy surrounding her switch from representing Britain, earned her the Jamaica Sportswoman of the Year Award. In addition, the respected US publication TRACK AND FIELD NEWS made her world number 1 in the 400 metres in its annual World Ranking issue. Needless to say, she was the first Jamaican woman to earn that honour.

Born in Portland and resident in England from the age of eight onward, Neufville was a running prodigy and represented Great Britain until 1970 when she chose to compete for Jamaica. Blessed with the range to run distances from 200 to 800 metres, Neufville did 4x100 duty for Jamaica in Edinburgh too and reached the sprint relay final.

Keen observers had seen Neufville fire a warning shot at the European Indoor Championships on March 14, where she won in a world indoor record time of 53.01.

Those wins, and an easy victory at the 1971 Pan-Am Games, made her the long range favourite for the 400 metres at the 1972 Olympics. Sadly, an Achilles tendon injury would interfere and the University of California at Berkley graduate would have to wait for her Olympic debut until 1976 at age 23.

Nevertheless her mark on Jamaican track and field is undeniable. Her personal best - 51.02 - remained as the national record and as the national under 20 record for decades. By comparison, the Boys and Girls Championships class 1 record is 51.13 seconds by Sonita Sutherland, then of Holmwood Technical High.

Added to that, her Commonwealth Games 400 gold medal was the first by a Jamaican woman and the same goes for her 1971 Pan-Am gold.

Jamaica graciously recognized the world record breaker's impact again in 1971 when her Pan-Am win earned her a second Sportswoman of the Year Award and in 2013, when the government bestowed on her the National Award, Commander of the Order of Distinction. 50 years after her day of days in Edinburgh, Neufville remains a seminal figure in the development of Jamaican track and field.