First Citizens Sports Foundation

HALL OF FAME



John R.N. Cumberbatch H.B.M

Athletics

Inducted in 1984

Being the first national to achieve a certain level is special. Others may come along and add to the medal tally, or break records, but there can only be one ‘first ever’.

This was the case with J.R.N Cumberbatch; then again, he was accustomed to setting the standard in local sprinting, excelling as he did over the shorter distances of the era – the mid-1930s to the early 1940s, the 100 yards and 220 yards. From his early days at QRC (Queen’s Royal College), his long, lean limbs seemed purpose-built for greater distances, the 440 and 880 yards perhaps, incorporating the full lap of the track. But Cumberbatch, emerging from the hotbed of sporting talent that was Belmont at the time, made the dash and half lap races all his own, with a preference for ‘the furlong’ as the 220 yards was known. By 1938, he set the record for a West Indian for the event, 21.6 seconds.

Such displays of speed and regional dominance ensured that he was part of Trinidad and Tobago's second ever team to attend a major sporting event, the third British Empire Games (later to become the Commonwealth Games) held in Sydney, Australia.

Taking place in February 1938, Cumberbatch joined 3-mile runner, Noel Stanford, and high jumper, John Ashmead, for the long journey by ship to Australia. Unable to train properly for several days on route, and arriving mere days before competition, a below par Cumberbatch got as far as the semi-finals in both events, returning times of 10.2 seconds in the 100 yards (the winner ran 9.7 seconds) and 21.7 for the 220 (with the winner running 21.2). He was adamant that with time allowed to prepare, instead of being spent on a boat, he would have performed better, a point he sought to prove the following year.

The British Amateur Athletic Championship was, despite its name, open to all entrants from around the globe, and in 1939 only the German and French athletes did not turn up as they were involved in the early skirmishes that would soon develop into World War II. Cumberbatch had prepared properly, a fact highlighted in the press that spoke of 'The West Indian Challenge' given that the five-man team that attended the championships in White City was the first ever from the Caribbean region.

He did not disappoint. In his pet distance over the half lap, Cumberbatch crossed the line in third place to make history by becoming the first Trinbagonian to win a medal at an international event. Later, the feat would be replicated by Eric Pierre in the long jump at the same championships.

Cumberbatch returned to Trinidad and Tobago a hero. He had taken on some of the best in the world and proved that someone from a small island nation could mix it up and medal with the very best. He would run until the mid-1940s, when younger sprinters came along seeking to test themselves against the standard: J.R.N. Cumberbatch.

Those, like McDonald Bailey, that went on to garner international medals of their own, were following in the unprecedented footsteps laid down by Cumberbatch.

For his groundbreaking services to sport, he received Trinidad and Tobago's Hummingbird Gold medal in the 1979 Honors List and was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1984.