First Citizens Sports Foundation

HALL OF FAME



Mannie Dookie

Athletics

Inducted in 1984

The Barefoot Runner. The Milk Boy. Mannie Albert Dookie's legend is firmly etched into Trinidad and Tobago's history books. Rarely has a sportsman so endeared himself to the population to become a true hero to the nation.

The man that would undertake a groundbreaking trajectory for Trinidad and Tobago's future sportsmen and women was born in Delhi Street, St James on 3rd February 1915, into the very humble surroundings that constituted the area at the time. By the age of 10 he took on a job as a milk delivery boy to help support his family. By the age of 12 he was running with great regularity once he finished his milk round.

In 1930, with the encouragement of his father, Thomas, who saw something special in his son's stride, he entered the Saddle Race, a fifteen and a half mile run around the Saddle Road, a mere mile from his St James home.

A complete unknown, the crowd and competitors were focused on the older, more familiar runners, not the skinny barefoot boy that was bold enough to mix it up with these grown men.

One hour and thirty-nine minutes later they all knew the name Mannie Dookie, because he finished ahead of everyone. The media christened him the Barefoot Runner, unaware that it was not some new advantageous angle to the discipline: he simply could not afford running shoes. By the time he tried to run with shoes later in his career, he found that he did not like them; his feet were already forged in the fire of the hundreds of miles that he covered on the road while training.

Winning road races was one thing, but the three-mile event on the track was the bastion of the nation's most celebrated (and talented) runners. Men like Francis Dinzey, the undisputed champion of the day.

Undeterred, in May, 1931 Dookie entered the 'Championships' – as the Empire Day Games were known – at a packed Queen's Park Oval. A seesawing race ended in victory for Dookie, roared home by the crowd in 17 minutes and 35 seconds. He returned to the road in 1932 to trounce a large field in the St. James Bridge to Teteron Bay race.

Now established as the best runner in the country at any distance over three miles, Dookie caused shock when he took to the starting line for the one-mile race at the 1933 Championships. Hypolite Sosa and Aldwyn Forde, the one-mile stars, echoed the crowd's sentiment of disbelief. That emotion would continue once the starter's pistol went off and Dookie immediately took the lead, never relinquishing it. His time was 4 minutes and 43 seconds. It proved to be a warm-up for the blue riband three-mile later in the day, where Dookie again covered himself in glory.

Later in the year he travelled to British Guiana and won the West Indian Olympiad three-mile, in 15 minutes 8.4 seconds.

Throughout 1933, every Trinbagonian athlete was striving to be their absolute best because there were rumors that Trinidad and Tobago would send a team to the 2nd Empire Games to be held in White City, England the following year. No Trinidad and Tobago team had been sent to the inaugural 1930 Games in Hamilton, Canada, but its success had ensured that every athlete within the British Empire wanted to be present for the next edition.

The Trinidad and Tobago Athletic Association, in its infancy, was not able to fund a team to the Games and the matter subsided, briefly. The torch paper was lit in May 1934 with Dookie's now annual win in the Championship three-mile, his time of 15 minutes 19 seconds almost on par with the best times globally. Suddenly, there was a question being asked by the public "Who will send Mannie Dookie to the Empire Games?"

The answer came from the *Trinidad Guardian* newspaper, which agreed to fund Dookie's trip.

The ensuing jubilation across the nation emphasized that this would be the first time that a Trinidad and Tobago team, albeit a one-man team, was going to a major international sporting event. Thousands saw him off from the St. Vincent Street Jetty in Port of Spain, while a curious British press awaited the arrival of the Barefoot Runner, whose three-mile times piqued interest.

The cinder track used for the Games was literally new ground for Dookie, and not best suited for a man running without shoes. In the three-mile, his feet began to chafe badly, and he tried to run through the pain, eventually giving in and retiring. With blistered feet, he faced the starter for the six-mile race and raced through the agony until the 14th lap, again retiring before the finish. His exploits though, had captured the attention of the hosts and he was the center of attention at a reception held by HRH Prince Edward, the future King of England engaging in long conversation with Dookie.

Thousands again flocked to the Port of Spain jetty to welcome him home, where the Mayor of Port of Spain held a reception at the Town Hall and bestowed a gold medal upon him for his efforts.

In his later years Dookie gave back to the sport of athletics that he so loved. He set up the Dookie Athletic Club to help with the coaching of young runners, many of whom he could be seen putting through their workouts on Port of Spain's Lady Chancellor hill. He was instrumental in convincing one of his charges to give up the 100 yards dash and concentrate on the 220 and 440 yards. Given Dookie's reputation, the runner listened to the coach. That young man – Edwin Skinner - went on to win an Olympic bronze medal in 1964 as part of Trinidad and Tobago's celebrated 4x400m relay team.

Mannie Dookie, the first person to represent Trinidad and Tobago at a major Games, was duly inducted into the Sports Hall of Fame in 1984.