

About Harry Jerome

The premier Canadian track athlete of his time, Jerome's athletic successes were partnered with scholastic excellence and social consciousness. Despite a relatively brief life, Jerome left all Canadians a proud legacy and a blueprint for success.

Born in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan in 1940, Harry Jerome and his family eventually moved to North Vancouver in the 1950s. The Jerome family - Harry Sr., his wife Elsie and their five children - were the only Black people in their conservative neighbourhood. As he was somewhat shy, Harry chose to avoid the limelight even after his athletic legend began to grow. The Canadian Press often mistook his quiet demeanour for arrogance and aloofness.

Though labouring under the weight of the country's expectations and assumptions, Harry went on to set the standard as the world's fastest man, with records in the 100 metres, 100 yard dash and indoor 60 metres. He also helped to establish a world record in the 4 x 100 metre relay. Throughout his distinguished athletic career, Jerome received numerous accolades at the University of Oregon and represented Canada at two Pan American Games and twice at the Commonwealth Games. But his finest moments would come at the Olympics, where he would represent Canada on three occasions.

Looking back, the Commonwealth Games were often the site of Harry's most difficult athletic setbacks, culminating in injury and disappointment almost as often as victory. Ironically, these obstacles would set the stage for his greatest athletic successes, displaying the true power of his determination and will to succeed. At the 1962 Commonwealth Games in Perth, Australia, Jerome suffered a career threatening injury, completely severing his left quadriceps muscle; most orthopaedic surgeons said that he would never run again.

In spite of the negative reports of "quitter" emanating from the Canadian press, Harry concentrated on his return. Months of quiet determination, physiotherapy, and courage set the stage for what would later be known as "the greatest comeback." In 1964, Jerome returned to track and field's largest stage, the Tokyo Olympics. Bearing a 30 centimetre scar on his left thigh - a testament to the severity of his injury - Jerome would capture bronze in the 100 metres and narrowly missed a second medal in the 200 metres. Proving that this success was no fluke, he would follow his Olympic showing with gold medal performances at both the Pan American and Commonwealth Games.

Despite his athletic successes, Jerome was always conscious of the challenges facing African Canadians. At the University of Oregon, he coupled his athletic achievements with scholastic success, earning both undergraduate and graduate degrees in Science. He would also parlay his athletic notoriety into opportunities for others, "using his fame and contacts he made in the sports world to get equipment for young athletes who could not afford them." Jerome also did extensive work in an effort to create opportunities for Blacks beyond sports. He was a vocal opponent of the misrepresentation of African Canadians in Canadian television, asking that licenses be suspended "if stations could not justify neither having Blacks as on-air personalities nor airing stories about the [African Canadian] community."

He was equally concerned about the opportunity for economic development among African Canadians. He fought to remove wage discrimination barriers against Blacks, and strove to improve the mainstream's perception of the African Canadian community - in one instance, he wrote to the major department stores and questioning the lack of Black models in their catalogues and as clerks in their stores. Despite his stature in the greater community, Jerome never forgot about his own upbringing or his role in bringing about change.

After his retirement from active competition in 1968, Jerome went on to work with the Federal Ministry of Sport. Using his considerable talents, he designed a series of cartoon manuals for coaching instructions and game rules for children, and created the Premier Sports Program for use in schools in British Columbia. Jerome also revolutionized track and field with the introduction of weight training for sprinters. He was named British Columbia's Athlete of the Century, and, in 1971, received the Order of Canada as a testament to his achievements.

In 1982, Harry Jerome died suddenly at the age of 42. Despite his untimely passing, he left a considerable legacy that is a source of pride for all Canadians. In 1988, a huge statue was erected in his honour along the sea wall of Vancouver's Stanley Park, and both the University of Oregon and province of British Columbia bear recreational facilities in his name as a testament to his greatness.

In a world where athletes often run from role model status, Jerome took on the concerns of both a community and a country, epitomizing excellence, determination, and dedication. Harry Jerome is truly a Canadian hero.