

## WHITFIELD : OLYMPIC CHAMPION, AMBASSADOR OF SPORT

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*African athletics are leaving their adolescence behind. The events in Mexico confirmed what everyone predicted.*

*One of the instigators of this maturity is none other than the most outstanding figure in long-distance sprint of the 1950's: the American, Mal WHITFIELD, triple Olympic champion in 1948 (800m. and 4 x 400m.) and 1952 (800m.), and holder of eighteen world records.*

*Mal WHITFIELD recently received a visit from a British journalist, Andrew MULLIGAN. The latter, before becoming the bard of the sports epic, often quite amazed his future colleagues by playing scrum half in the Irish Rugby XV. He then travelled round the world continuing to practise his sport as a member of the well-known teams of Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and France. Because of his natural ability he was quickly considered to be a talented advocate of the purity of amateur sport.*

*The Observer of the 12th January last, published his article on the interview he had been granted by WHITFIELD, whom he portrays as a missionary of athletics. We should like to thank him for giving us permission to publish certain passages :*

Ever since Mal WHITFIELD quit the track (was it really 14 years ago ?), he has devoted his life to inspiring Africans to realise their athletic potential. As a Youth and Student Affairs Officer in the United States Information Service, his parish extends from the Red Sea to the Kalahari Desert, and from the Atlas Mountains to the Zambesi River.

Whenever and wherever WHITFIELD flies from his twin East African bases in Addis Ababa and Nairobi, he is feted by enthusiastic African athletes and - more significantly- by their officials.

But then, Mal WHITFIELD has a way with people - especially Africans. Perhaps it is his coffee-coloured skin, the gentle suggestion of 'Negritude' about him which make a Californian Afro-American so acceptable.

Certainly, it is a profound respect for WHITFIELD's supreme ability - first as an athlete and then as a teacher - which makes the eager African athlete listen . . .

Now WHITFIELD is apolitical about sport. He was deeply offended by the Black Power demonstrations on the podia of Mexico City. 'It's untenable to use sport for political ends. I appreciated their civic interest, but they could've withdrawn from the US team or kept their promises to participate graciously.'

But then, Mal WHITFIELD was the product of a gentler decade. With degrees in physical education and urban planning, he was unusually fulfilled for a coloured American athlete. Yet one detects that even he felt that after-track fulfilment could only lie outside the US, and not in battling the social problems of black America at home . . .

He condemns what he calls 'prejudice against the high plateau Africans' because they were better adapted to altitudes. 'They were the best-trained athletes at the Games. They were internationally seasoned athletes, and I predicted before the Games who would be the winners, and of course my American colleagues thought I was out of my mind, but the pudding tastes better when you eat it.'

'Believe it or not, even if the Games had been held at low altitude it wouldn't have made much difference . . .'

... WHITFIELD is full of praise for the African athletes' code of ethics in regard to amateur athletics. 'I do know that the African athlete is about the last of the Mohicans when it comes to amateurism. These athletes are either from school or the military, they still have to do their duty and don't receive outside assistance.

'I don't know of any champion who has changed his way of living because of Olympic achievement. Nobody has walked up to MAMO (1) and given him a suit of clothes or a pair of shoes.'

WHITFIELD foresees no end to Africa's new-found role in the international arena. 'African countries are focusing their attention on sport as one of the forms of nation-building. Its identification and unification - getting the tribes together to compete - and then sending the best of them out to represent their country, that sort of thing. In Kenya the great athletic performances have come from a variety of tribes.' . . .

(1) Mamo WOLDE, Marathon Olympic champion.