

# CELEBRATING OUR SPORTS PERSONALITIES

BECAUSE THERE'S MORE TO LIFE THAN JUST CRICKET,  
BY VALENTINO SINGH

While Crawford and Walcott hit the pinnacle of sport at the Olympics, there are several other Olympians whose successes have consistently lifted the spirits of T&T

Just 20 days before Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) celebrated its 50th anniversary of Independence on 31st August 2012, a 19-year-old boy from Toco, a fishing village in the deep eastern part of the country, forced the world to stand up and pay attention to its sporting prowess.

The 84.58 metres throw which Keshorn Walcott achieved in the men's javelin event at the London Olympics, not only stunned his more seasoned opponents, and earned him the gold medal, it also ended a 36-year wait for the tiny Republic of just 1.3 million people for a step up to the highest rung on the podium of Olympism.

Walcott joined 100 metres sprinter Hasely Crawford as the second Trinidad and Tobago citizen to win an Olympic gold medal. As was the case with Walcott, Crawford's 1976 sprint to the finish line in Montreal, was achieved against more established competitors, and gave his countrymen something to celebrate on the eve of an historic transformation to Republican status which it gained on 1st August later that year. These two feats have been the highlights of the country's sporting achievements in its 50 years of independence.

The world's sporting stage, however, is no stranger to the land of steelpan and calypso.

Sporting connoisseurs will no doubt relish the memories of Germany 2006, when the T&T Soca Warriors left an indelible mark on the world, stealing the hearts of everyone at the FIFA World Cup, with their gritty on-the-field display, drawing goalless with Sweden in their first World Cup appearance and then holding England for some 83 minutes, before collapsing to a 0-2 loss. Despite crashing out after the first round, T&T left Germany with a fanbase of international proportions for its fun-loving approach to the tournament. T&T had been very close to the final on two previous occasions, controversially losing 1-2 in its 1974 bid to Haiti, in a match in which it scored five goals – four of which were disallowed. Haiti went on

to the finals while the referee and linesmen who officiated the game were banned for life.

As if that was not heart-breaking enough, T&T needed a draw in front of its home crowd at the Hasely Crawford Stadium in 1990 to go to Italy, but fell to an embarrassing 0-1 loss to America.

Very few are likely to forget the World Netball Championships which were staged in Port of Spain in 1979. The premier international netball tournament, it not only united the people, but saw T&T earning its first and only world team title. Along with England and New Zealand, T&T emerged joint champions. T&T needed to beat New Zealand in its finals match to stand alone at the pinnacle, but the Kiwis proved too tough to crack and won 49-33.

In the boxing ring, there have been titles from Claude Noel and Leslie Stewart, while women's boxer Giselle Salandy had eight titles to her credit when a car accident ended her life in 2009. Noel challenged Mexican Rodolfo Gonzalez in 1981 for the WBA lightweight title. He had to withstand a strong finish by the Mexican, but came away victorious, to give independent T&T its first boxing crown.

Known as the "Laventille Tiger", Stewart challenged for the WBA light heavyweight title in 1986, but was TKO'd by Marvin Johnson when the bout was stopped. In the rematch the following year, Stewart dominated Johnson whose corner retired the fighter in the ninth round.

At the age of 14, Salandy defeated Paola Rojas to become the youngest person to win a world title, the WIBA IBERO title in Curaçao. When she defeated Manela Daniels four years later, she became the youngest female in the world to win the NABC title. In 2006 she won six world titles in one fight and successfully defended them against Yvonne Reis one year later. In 2008, she defeated unbeaten Karolina Lukasik in her mandatory defense, winning eight title belts – WBC, WBA, WBE, WIBA, IWBF, WIBF, GBU and UBC.

Later that year, Salandy defeated Yahaira

Opposite: Man of the moment, Olympic Men's Javelin Gold Medal winner, Keshorn Walcott

Hernandez, to secure her eight belts, breaking a Caribbean record by being the first boxer in the history of the Caribbean to successfully defend all her world titles on six consecutive occasions.

Individual world titles have also been won in chess and golf, Maria Nunes, snatching the 11-12 age group at the Junior Golf Championships in 1979 and Shawn Tavares enjoying similar junior success in 1982 at the World Junior Chess Championships. There is also professional golfer Stephen Ames, born and bred Trinbagonian, who has won four PGA, two European and one Nationwide titles.

While Crawford and Walcott hit the pinnacle of sport at the Olympics, there are several other Olympians whose successes have consistently lifted the spirits of T&T. These include Ato Boldon (eight Olympic and World Championship medals), Wendell Mottley, Edwin Roberts, Edwin Skinner, Kent Bernard, Richard Thompson, Keston Bledman, Marc Burns, Emmanuel Callender, LaLonde Gordon, Jarrin Solomon, Deon Lendore, Aide Alleyne Forte, and swimmer George Bovell, who is the only non-track and field athlete to have won an Olympic medal. He won bronze in Athens 2004, in the 200 metres individual medley.

The early days of independence would have seen the likes of cyclist Roger Gibbon, dominating the region. Gibbon placed 5th in the kilometre time trial in Mexico, in 1968, while Gene Samuel just missed bronze in the same event in 1984 in Los Angeles. And they would be included among the stalwarts at World, Commonwealth, Pan American and Carifta Games. Names such as

Ian Morris, Mike Solomon, Darrel Brown, Siobhan Cropper in the swimming pool, Debbie O'Connor in badminton, Elizabeth Gibson in tennis, Dexter St Louis and Leela Calpu on the ping pong board, Roger Daniel, the shooter, Emile Abaraham, Candace Scott and Cleopatra Borel-Browne and Kelly Anne Baptiste, the first T&T woman to win a World Championship medal, have also impacted on the nation's sporting conscience.

Some 50 years after Independence, the T&T sporting fraternity continues to be a shining light to the rest of the community. The most recent success from Walcott, a boy, not yet 20 years old, is testimony to the wealth of talent which resides in T&T. It might have been an unexpected one, but certainly Walcott's gold medal was an appropriate gift to the nation on its Golden Jubilee. ■

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