It’s a standing agreement, implicitly understood: the last weekend in April of each year, the reunion is at Roberts’ home in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He makes the pelau, and depending on the chill in the air, they gather around the pool or fill the family room. Then the stories begin. There’s Roberts’ story about running for the prize of sugar, getting a gag prize of salt, but recognizing at age nine that he was a lightning streak among the runners. There’s Kent’s story of being dared by classmate, Orville Harris, at age fifteen to compete in the 100 yard dash, beating the star runner while running barefoot, and deciding then and there to give up soccer. Skinner’s trajectory onto the national and international sports arena evolved from family routines; his father, a WWII Army veteran, required all seven sons to run with him each morning before school. For Wendell, it started in elementary school where he toyed with the long jump and the triple jump before deciding to hone his skills as a distance runner. Finally Len’s involvement in sports was a purposeful decision—made at age ten after reading Dickens’ Great Expectations—to use athletics as the stairway to higher education.

Edwin Roberts, Kent Bernard, Edwin Skinner, and Wendell Mottley were the men who put Trinidad and Tobago in the spotlight for athletics at the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo, Japan. The country had sent teams to the Olympics since 1948, but Trinidad won its first medals in track and field in 1964 when Roberts took the bronze in the 200 meter; Wendell earned a silver in the 400 meter; and Kent, Roberts, Skinner, and Wendell ran together as members of the 4 x 400 meter relay team to win the bronze. It was the first and last time that Trinidad and Tobago medaled in that event at an Olympic Games—earning them the moniker “The Miracle Team.” Two years later, in 1966, with Skinner hurt, Lennox Yearwood, unsuccessful in the 800 meter, joined the 4 x 400 relay team to help set a world record at the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in Kingston, Jamaica. Calypso artist Young Killer memorialized that event in song:

Yearwood ran 800 and he flop
But in the relay came back on top
With Mottley, Roberts, and Kent Bernard
They made history for Trinidad.
Track and field aficionados the world over know the last weekend in April as the date for the oldest and largest indoor relay carnival in North America held annually at the University of Pennsylvania. For these former Olympians and best friends, it is also a time to reconnect with each other and with their compadres from that era. For newbies to the group, it is a rare glimpse into the history of track and field in Trinidad and Tobago; an insider’s understanding of the impact of sports on class, the opportunities it offers for upward social mobility; and the story of five men all born in the 1940s who parlayed a natural talent into success as world class athletes, earned scholarships that led to advanced degrees and professional careers, and became agents for social change in Trinidad and Tobago.

Today we know that the speed of a sprinter can be enhanced by the type of track he runs on. In the 1950s, however, the only tracks that these runners knew were outdoor grass tracks. After being recruited by universities in the US, the Caribbean athletes were amazed at the times clocked on outside turf tracks and inside wooden tracks. Today, we also know that the race is enhanced by the quality of the shoes the sprinters wear. However, the Caribbean runners wore whatever shoe or sneaker that was available, often running without shoes because bare feet were all they could afford. Money and other material comforts were scarce. Len explains: “very early on, I realized that many opportunities were for the chosen and I was not a part of the chosen, so I had to find a way to change my life chances.” His decision was to become an elite athlete, not an easy feat for a boy growing up in rural Arima, about sixteen miles from Port of Spain, the capital city. His mental and physical discipline was honed by a single mother who lost her husband—his father—when Len was three years old; and by Coach Turner, who served as mentor, friend, and father figure. By 1960, his successes included the record for the half-mile among runners in the Under-15 group. Eventually settling into the 800 meter, he earned a silver medal at the 1966 Central American and Caribbean Games in Puerto Rico, a spot on the 4 x 400 relay team that made history later that year in Kingston, Jamaica, and participation in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Erasing the sense of having been born into a tragic destiny, Len earned a doctorate in sociology and became a lawyer and a member of the team that created the Black Studies Program at Buffalo State University. For his successes and his contributions to sports programs in his hometown, Len was honored with his own street—the Lennox Yearwood Expressway.

The men have all given back to their home country in some way. Wendell and Skinner moved back to Trinidad and Tobago to make their contribution tangible. As youngsters, both attended Queen’s Royal College, the oldest secondary school in the country, which also educated Peter Minshall, one of the artistic designers of the opening ceremony for the 1992 and 1996 Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain and Atlanta, Georgia. The rivalry between them during those years was intense. Somehow Wendell won most often.

PARTICIPATION IN PROFESSIONAL ATHLETIC ORGANIZATIONS IS ANOTHER WAY THESE ATHLETES PROMOTE SOCIAL CHANGE AND HELP IMPROVE LIFE CHANCES FOR THE YOUTH
Skinner headed the Economics Section of the University of the West Indies-based Caribbean Industrial Research Institute for seventeen years before joining the Memphis Pioneers Athletic Club as president and coach. His work in supporting the academic and athletic development of youth has resulted in more than 40 members being admitted to universities on athletic scholarships since 1998 and recognition by the International Association of Athletics Federation in 2009 for his contribution to the prominence of track and field. In addition to the 1964 Olympics, Skinner's achievements in his thirteen-year career as an athlete included the national record for both the 200m and 400m in 1962, and the world indoor record for the 4 x 400m as part of the team from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore.

Participation in professional athletic organizations is another way these athletes promote social change and help improve life chances for the youth. Roberts and Kent both work with young people. As a special education high school teacher in Philadelphia, Roberts coaches the men's and women's track teams and officiates at the Penn Relays each year. In 1961, he ran against and beat, on home turf, Mihkla “Flying” Singh from India who had already been to two Olympic Games and placed fourth in the 400m at the 1960 Olympics in Rome. Ranked among the world's top ten runners of the 200m by Track and Field News from 1964-1971, and the second athlete from Trinidad and Tobago to compete in three successive Olympic Games, Roberts’ only unfulfilled dream is to coach his country's track teams.

Kent works as a probation officer with young people involved in Michigan’s Juvenile Justice System. Twice a Big Ten champion for the 440, he competed primarily to maintain his academic scholarship and did so successfully for twelve years on the international stage. Academic excellence was a non-negotiable for him. As an assistant coach at the University of Michigan, his student-athletes, recruited largely from the Caribbean, had the highest rate of on-time graduation of all student groups. Like all the other members of the team who live outside of Trinidad & Tobago, Kent returns home several times each year to conduct clinics for aspiring athletes and ensure their exposure to recruiters.

Their shared experiences on the tracks unite them, but it is the conscious effort each makes to nurture the relationships and save the friendships that keeps the five men close. The stories keep on coming. Pondering their successes individually and collectively, Wendell, who anchored both relays and authored Trinidad and Tobago Industrial Policy 1959–2008, reflected: “that team we assembled in the mid 1960s was an unusual occurrence in Trinidad. There is nothing like the bonding of a relay . . . It was fantastic. Sometimes in your athletic career everything comes together and you become more than human. There is something that you touch that just lifts you, you can feel it. It’s something fleeting . . . but for that moment, we four just brought it all together, in a moment that never thereafter we were able to do.”

Their legacy—enshrined in universities and halls of fame and in national, regional and international associations—lives on in many ways, but most visibly now through Kent’s son Kolin and Wendell’s daughter Meredith, who are high school and college athletes.