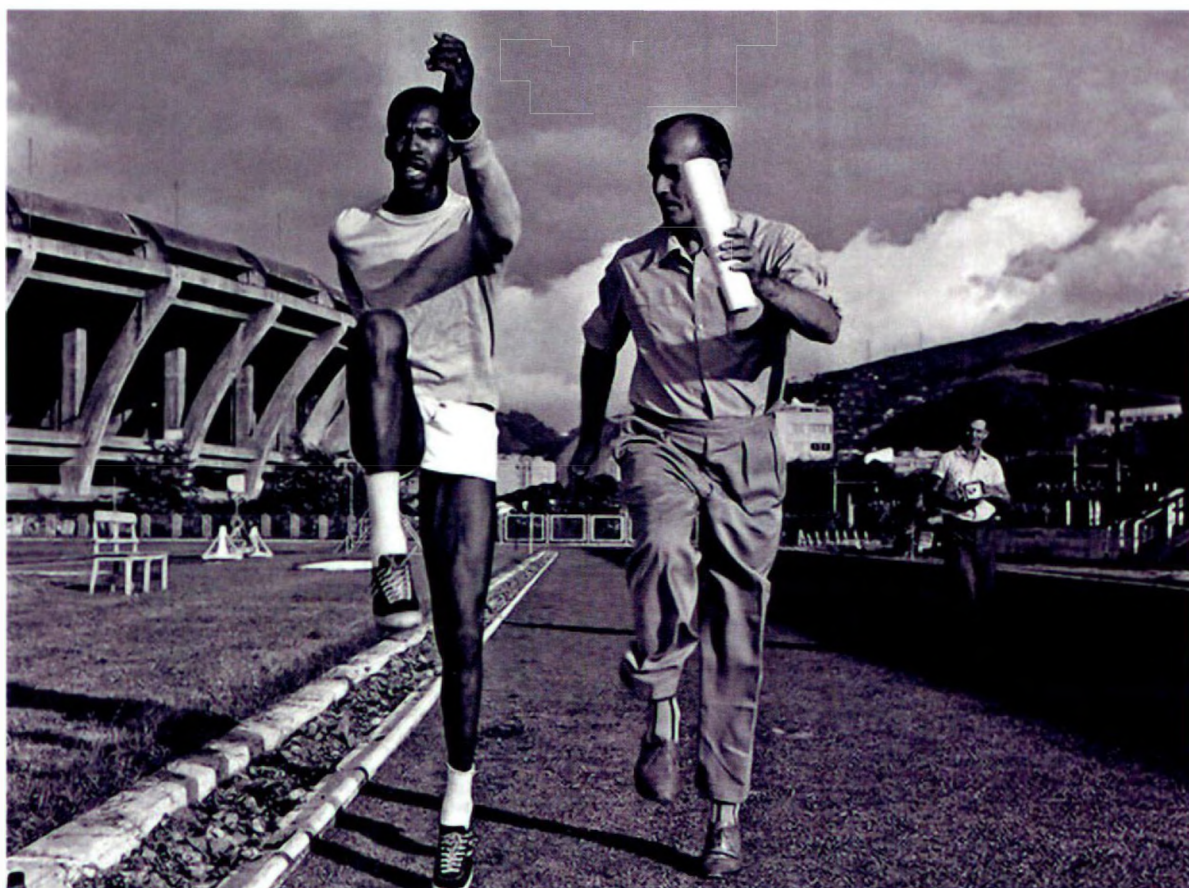


Adhemar da Silva and the "little uncle"

By Volker Kluge

Teacher and pupil:
Dietrich Gerner and
Adhemar Ferreira da
Silva, who called his
coach "little uncle".

Photos: Volker Kluge Archive



Brazilians have won 23 gold, 30 silver and 55 bronze medals in the Olympic Games before Rio. The first under their national flag was achieved by pistol shooter Guilherme Paraense at the 1920 Antwerp Games, but they had to wait 32 years until the next, won by 24-year-old triple jumper Adhemar Ferreira da Silva. After his success in Helsinki, his second gold medal followed in Melbourne. More than half a century later, only sailors Torben Grael and Roberto Scheidt had emulated this achievement.

Da Silva embodied Olympic sport in Brazil like no other. In 1982 I met him in Athens, as the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) celebrated its 70th anniversary on the fringes of the European Championships. Da Silva had been invited along with eleven other celebrities and greeted me in German: "Guten Tag, wie geht es Ihnen?" And thus we were on the subject.

It was no chance matter that da Silva could express himself very well in German for he spoke seven languages. It was in May 1946 when this young black man, then 18, appeared with a friend at the evening training session of the athletes of FC São Paulo. He explained to coach Dietrich Gerner, a German, that he played football for a club on the outskirts edge of town, but both his parents, father a railway worker, his mother an assistant housekeeper, had demanded that he should look for a "better sport".

Gerner liked the look of this slight young man, although he could not recognise any particular sporting abilities in him. He was poor at the 100 metres, and had no talent for middle or long distances. In the high jump he had trouble clearing 1.50 metres, and showed no interest in long jump, in which he reached 5.20 metres.

The young Adhemar came into contact with the triple jump or Hop, Step and Jump quite by chance in 1947.

He liked the technique. In his first competition, which took him in 1947 straight away to Mexico City, he jumped 13.05 m. In the second – on 1st June – he got to 13.56 m – a Brazilian record for beginners. That was the start of a great career. It also began a friendship with a coach who became a second father to him. From then on Adhemar called Gerner “titio” – “little uncle”.

Colonists and the great coffee crisis

Dietrich Gerner had been born in 1902, grew up in Pomerania, and was once one of Germany’s best athletes. In 1923 he took a course as a sports teacher at the Deutsche Hochschule für Leibesübungen in Berlin. From 1926 he studied at the Higher Trade School in Stettin (today the Polish Szczecin) with the aim of becoming a merchant.

In Stettin he joined the well-known Preussen sports club, whose most prominent member was world record holder Dr. Otto Peltzer. On 27th July 1927, Gerner was runner-up to Pelzer over 400 m hurdles in the German Championships. His time of 55.1 seconds, put him ninth in the the world rankings.

In particular he was encouraged by Sepp Christmann, the founder of modern hammer-throwing. Gerner was a good enough standard to take part in the Olympic Games. But he finished fourth in the 1928 German Championships and so narrowly missed Olympic qualification.

By this time, he had resolved to emigrate to Brazil. He had been persuaded to do so by Max Engelhardt, the President of “Germania” the German sports club in São Paulo. During the Second World War the club changed its name to EC Pinheiros in deference to the allies.

In February 1929 Gerner arrived in São Paulo, to embark on a career in the export timber trade. However at that time the Brazilian economy was flatlining. The dramatic fall in coffee prices had led to a state crisis, which had an effect on the Olympic Games. In 1928 there had been no Brazilian team in Amsterdam.

And so new colonists were welcome to get the economy moving again. As far as sport was concerned, Gerner was not the only German immigrant. In autumn 1930 he was followed by the long jumper Rudolf Dobermann. He had been English champion in 1927 and had set a new European record with 7.645 m the following year. While Dobermann started a job as coach with the Brazilian Athletics Confederation, Gerner continued his career as an active athlete. At the end of October 1931 he set a South American decathlon record points total of 7309.370 at a meeting in São Paulo, but he was now offered the chance of a job as a sports teacher. So he said farewell to amateur sport and thus abandoned hopes of competing in the Games in Los Angeles.

Football star Leônidas cleared the way

In 1941, after a year’s study, Gerner passed his diploma as a teacher in athletics and tennis. He began his coaching career with the exclusive Club Atlético Paulistano in close proximity to the Jardim América. But in 1944 he switched to the rich São Paulo Futebol Clube (SPFC). Two years earlier they were able to sign football star Leônidas da Silva on an eight year deal from Flamengo in Rio de Janeiro. It had been the biggest transfer deal to date.

Nicknamed “Diamante negro” Leônidas had scored no fewer than seven goals at the 1938 World Cup in France, occasionally playing barefoot. He injured himself in the replay against Czechoslovakia, so that he missed the semi-final against World Cup holders Italy. Brazil lost 1–2. He was not available until the game for third place against Sweden, in which Brazil won a 4–2 success.

The 1938 World Cup matches were transmitted over loudspeakers in cities such as São Paulo. Football had finally become the sport of the masses in Brazil. But it also represented a social force. For players like Leônidas it was a counter to often deep-seated racial prejudices which argued that black athletes were less able to perform. Boxer Joe Louis and runner Jesse Owens had a similar impact in the USA. This prepared the ground on which talents like Adhemar da Silva could flourish.

In the shadow of the SPFC, whose supporters were called “São Paulinos”, athletics started to flourish. The club, in which Gerner initially looked after the runners, had produced since 1945 numerous Brazilian champions, among them Sebastião Alves Monteiro who won the prestigious Saint Silvester Road Race in São Paulo in 1945 and 1946.



The SC Preussen Stettin relay squad which set a new German 3 x 1000 metres record in 1927: (from left) Dr. Otto Peltzer, Willi Boltze and Dietrich Gerner.

Darling of the public at the 1952 Olympic Games: Adhemar da Silva. The Brazilian improved his own triple jump world record to 16.12 m and then again to 16.22 m. to make sure of victory.

Photo: Official Report Helsinki 1952



Triple jump – a “Brazilian” event

Before the Second World War, Brazil had no world class athletes except Sylvio Padilha, who had been fifth in 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin over 400 m hurdles and who was a member of the IOC from 1964 to 1995. The beginning of a tradition was hinted at, when in 1937 João Redher Neto – actually a decathlete – became South American champion in triple jump and was followed four years later by Carlos Pinto, who also set a South American record with 15.10 m.

Triple jump from then on became a Brazilian domain. After Pinto came Geraldo de Oliveira, who won the next two South American titles – in 1945 and 1947. The Brazilian Olympic Committee (COB) decided now to send three triple jumpers to the 1948 Olympic Games: besides de Oliveira, who it was hoped would win a medal in London, but he only placed fifth. Two athletes with similar names were also sent causing confusion which continues to this day. Twenty year old Adhemar da Silva finished eighth, and Hélio Coutinho da Silva, 25, was eleventh. At the South American Championships in 1949 in Lima the Brazilian trio occupied the entire podium.

Tough domestic competition inspired Adhemar da Silva, who made his definitive breakthrough on 3rd December 1950. With exactly 16.00 m in São Paulo he equalled the world record set by the Japanese Naoto Tajima when won Olympic gold in Berlin in 1936.

The following year da Silva improved his mark by a centimetre, but his namesake stayed on his heels.

Hélio, who had been second at the first Pan-American Games behind Adhemar, leapt 15.99 m the third best performance of all time. Thus the world ranking list for 1951 was led by two Brazilians. Regrettably Hélio was injured during that competition and was forced to abandon the triple jump.

The charismatic Olympic champion of Helsinki

As the 1952 Helsinki Olympics approached, there was no shortage of competitor for the gold medal. The new rivals whom da Silva now had to face came from the Soviet Union, who entered the Olympic arena for the first time. The most likely prospect was Leonid Shcherbakov, the same age as da Silva, who in 1950 had set a European record and in the same year won the European Championship in Brussels.

Helsinki provided da Silva with a moment of glory. In the second round he improved his own world record with 16.12 m, and in the final to 16.22 m. Four of his attempts lay over 16 m, which Shcherbakov – an outright strength jumper – only narrowly failed to reach. Despite a European record of 15.98 m he had to be satisfied with silver. In third place was a further South American: Arnaldo Devonish from Venezuela. Like da Silva he had come from football to athletics, where he had adopted Gerner's training methods.

But it was not merely for his performances that da Silva was one of the most admired and popular athletes in Helsinki, which had a previous history. When in 1949



the 10,000 m world record holder Viljo Heino came to São Paulo to take part in the Saint Silvester Race, the Finn was accompanied everywhere by two interpreters. Da Silva did not move from their side.

As a consequence, he soon picked up a little Finnish and made good use of this in 1952. At the arrivals hall of Helsinki Airport he greeted the Finns with "Terve!" – "Hello!" and he asked in Finnish "What is the weather like?" The fans loved his charisma, especially as he showed great patience and a willingness to sign autographs.

In 1953 on his European tour he returned to Helsinki, where he was rapturously received. As a reward for his Olympic victory, Gerner also undertook with him a journey to Japan, during which da Silva competed seven times and also met Naoto Tajima, the athlete who had preceded him as world record holder.

In August 1953, still a sports student took part in the international Student Sports Week held in Dortmund (This was a predecessor of the Universiade). He won easily with 15.92 m. Six days later, on 19th August 1953, the news came from Moscow that Shcherbakov had taken his world record albeit only by a centimetre. For Gerner, who thought long term, it was a signal that his protégé, who after Helsinki had celebrated a lot and trained little, would have to improve his technique to keep his position at the top of his event. He had long recognised the necessity, as da Silva's weak point was the "step" and that that was Shcherbakov's strong point.



As a reward for his Olympic victory, Gerner went on a tour with his protégé in 1953. In Japan alone da Silva competed seven times, winning each time.

Below: During this trip he met his predecessor Naoto Tajima, Japan's Olympic champion from 1936. The coach facilitated the conversation.

Photos: Volker Kluge Archive

What emerged was a tailor-made result: In 1954 da Silva leap: 16.22 m, exactly the distance he had achieved in Helsinki. The following year he competed in the Pan-American Games. The date was 16th March 1955 eight years almost to the day after his modest debut. He recorded 16.56 m on his final jump, improving Shcherbakov's world record by 33 centimetres.

As luck would have it, this performance was his 100th competition. Then he embarked on a 45 day tour competing in North America. On his return he found a congratulatory telegram from Moscow in São Paulo.





In Melbourne Adhemar da Silva won his second Olympic gold and improved the Olympic record to 16.35.

Below: the 1956 medallists (from left) Vitold Kreer (URS), da Silva and the Icelander Vilhjálmur Einarsson.

Photos: Official Report 1956

Despite all successes, coach and athlete still lived a very modest way. In 1954, Gerner, had received a fixed monthly payment of 8000 cruzeiros, but lost this the following year and was dependent on bonuses. He moved with da Silva to CR Vasco de Gama, a club that specialized in rowing.

Da Silva proved that he was still the "big boss" in 1956 at the Olympic Games in Melbourne, where despite a tooth infection which flared up three days before the start of his competition, he retained his Olympic title. His big rival proved not to be Shcherbatov, but an outsider: Vilhjálmur Einarsson of Iceland who had trained as a student at Dartmouth College in America. He now won his country's first Olympic medal.

With 16.26 m he pushed another Russian, Vitold Kreer, into third place. Shcherbakov was only sixth. This order was repeated on 4th August 1957 at the III International Games in Moscow: 1. da Silva 15.92 m, 2. Einarsson 15.90 m, 3. Shcherbakov 15.70 m. Now the Brazilian had been unbeaten for seven years.

The campaign: "A house for Adhemar"

After his second Olympic victory a nation lay at his feet, as da Silva experienced the adulation hitherto the preserve of footballers in Brazil. The newspaper *Gazeta Esportivo* used that for a campaign with the title "A house for Adhemar".

The Brazilians were urged to present da Silva with a house. It would be a campaign which rebounded on him. The strict rules on amateurism prevented the receipt of valuable gifts. In order to avoid disqualification as a professional, da Silva was forced to reject this tempting offer.

It was a different matter when French director Marcel Camus offered him a film role, for which da Silva was not appearing as an athlete. *Black Orpheus* (*Orfeu Negro*) was Camus's second film. In it he transposed the ancient legend of Orpheus and Eurydice to the carnival time of modern Rio de Janeiro.

With the exception of the American Marpessa Dawn, who had the female lead and for whom the film represented a major career boost, Camus worked principally with amateur actors. For the role of Orpheus he had considered the attractive footballer Breno Mello, who came from a impoverished background and whom he had noticed in the streets of Rio.

In deciding in favour of da Silva, Camus certainly was influenced by the athlete's popularity. This would also guarantee more publicity for the film. The role had something extra, for da Silva played a man costumed as "Death", who follows Eurydice around. As in antiquity the story ended as a tragedy. This did not apply to the reception for the film. On the contrary: in 1959 it was awarded a "Palme d'Or" in Cannes. In 1960 it received the "Oscar" for best foreign film and a "Golden Globe". The Bossa-Nova music with classics like *A Felicidade* the samba began their victorious procession.

A lawyer for the poorest

Adhemar da Silva was now over 30 and the father of two children. In the triple jump he was still capable of 16 metres, but the world record in 1960 was already more than a metre further. Shortly before the Olympic Games, Poland's Józef Schmidt reacted 17.03 m. As expected





In *Black Orpheus (Orfeu Negro)* da Silva played a man dressed as "Death" who pursues Eurydice. The film was awarded the "Palm d'Or" in Cannes in 1959. In 1960 it received the "Oscar" for the best foreign film and a "Golden Globe".

he then secured the gold medal, while da Silva in his fourth Olympic Games was only fourteenth. It was not the sporting farewell he had envisaged.

After that he immersed himself in studies in four different directions: law, journalism, sports teaching and publicity work. He began his post athletic career of all as a coach, among other places in Nigeria, where he worked from 1964 to 1966. But after he had passed his examination as a lawyer in 1968, he opened his own practice "because I had grasped that Brazil is in more need of lawyers than coaches".

Children and teenagers grew up in miserable conditions and for that reason, many often became criminals. This had a profound effect on him. At that 1982 meeting in Athens he reflected "I have a huge amount of work".

As a role model for Brazil's triple jumpers, his inspirational effect was clear. In 1968 in Mexico City Nelson Prudencio won Olympic silver, to be followed onto the podium by João Carlos de Oliveira who won bronze medals in 1976 and 1980.

Twenty years on from da Silva's triumph, de Oliveira had brought the world record back to Brazil. Once again this was achieved in Mexico, this time with a leap of 17.89 m. De Oliveira's story had a tragic conclusion. At the end of 1981 he was the innocent victim of a car accident, as a result of which his right leg had to be amputated. He

died in 1999 of a double lung inflammation. In fact, da Silva survived him by two years. The Estádio do Morumbi, owned by the São Paulo Football Club is his memorial. The foundation stone was laid in the year when Adhemar da Silva won his first Olympic title. ■



In Rome in 1960 da Silva took part in his fourth Olympic Games. He carried the Brazilian flag at the opening ceremony, just as he had done four years before in Melbourne. In the 1990s a memorial to him was erected in the Estádio do Morumbi in São Paulo.

Photos: 100 Years Brazil Olympic Committee 1914-2014, Volker Kluge Archive; Gazetapress

