

The First-Ever High School State Track & Field Championship Meet

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At the same time that Pierre de Coubertin was attempting to gain support in his attempt to revive the Olympic Games, a small group of American high schools were trying to organize an interscholastic championship competition in track and field. **Out** of this movement came the first sponsored state meet conducted anywhere in the United States. It took place on Saturday, June 8, 1895 at The University of Wisconsin in Madison, Wis., under the leadership of John R. Richards of the University. It was conducted under rules of the Western Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (later known as the “Big Ten” Conference). This was at a time when track and field at the high school and college levels was developing rapidly, and some of the events held at that time no longer exist.

The first-ever state meet involved about 100 individuals, many of whom competed in several events, totaling about 350 entries. The athletes came from ten different schools from across the southern part of the State of Wisconsin and included two private academies, which were neither public nor technically high schools. In the several years following, the participation by schools state-wide increased greatly, and even schools from the Upper Peninsular of Michigan were invited to participate. Ishpeming, Mich., won the Wisconsin team championship in 1897.

In the 1895 meet, Jack Fox of the Milwaukee Academy was listed in the daily newspaper’s advance story as competing in four running and four field events - eight events in the one day meet (he finished second in three events). However, the most outstanding athlete of the day was Alvin Kraenzlein of Milwaukee East Division, who won five first places. Kraenzlein, of course, later went on to fame in the Olympic Games of 1900 in Paris where he won an unprecedented four gold medals. (Full details of the events and performances will be given in the presentation.)

A total of 13 different individual events comprised the schedule of events along with one team relay races. Ten of the individual events still exist, although in metric equivalent: 100 yard dash, 220 yard dash, 440 yard dash, 880 yard run, mile run, 120 yard high hurdles, 12 lb. shot put, running broad jump (now called the long jump), running high jump, and pole vault.

Events no longer contested include the 220 yard low hurdles, 12 lb. hammer throw, and the mile race walk. Another unusual event, the mile bicycle race, was not included in the 1895 inaugural meet but was added the following year as a non-scoring event. The hand-written records of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (W.I.A.A.) - the pioneer such organization in the United States - details the costs of shipping the bicycles by railroad train (the teams from a distance also traveled by train). Official W.I.A.A. correspondence also deals with some problem about the bicycle event which caused it to be dropped a few years later.

The team relay race was described as a road race, but the distance covered was only 4/5 of a mile. Six team members were named, but apparently only four actually ran - with the winning time of 3:17.0 by Milwaukee South Division.

Several problems developed with the first several meets, which became concerns for all of athletics in the developing stages at the high school level. These problems, dealing with eligibility matters such as maximum age of a high school athlete caused state-wide standards in Wisconsin and led to national eligibility rules. In the 1895 meet, the winner of the half-mile and mile runs was a 20-year old. In the 1901 Wisconsin State Meet, there was a disqualification of an over-age athlete (not done intentionally) who had won the 100-yard dash, finished second in the 220, and scored 1/3 point in the pole vault. Other issues such as the limitation of number of events also had to be resolved. In order to deal with these and other issues, Wisconsin formed the first state high school association in 1895 and in 1920 was the leader in the formation of the "Federation of High School Athletic Associations of the Mid West" (which included the states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin). In 1922 eleven states formed the National Federation.