



# *The Beginnings of* **TRACK and FIELD SPORTS** *in Minnesota*

WALTER M. OSTREM

THE NEW YORK Athletic Club is credited with holding America's first amateur track and field competition in 1868. Just four years later Shattuck School of Faribault sponsored the first organized track meet in Minnesota. The school's leadership may have been stimulated by students from the East who wanted athletics similar to those popular in their home states. Interest in track grew rapidly at Shattuck and elsewhere in the state, and by the 1880s track and field competition had become a part of organized sport activity in many Minnesota high schools and colleges, even though the development of proper facilities lagged behind the construction of cinder tracks in the East.<sup>1</sup>

---

MR. OSTREM is order librarian at Mankato State College. He holds a master's degree in library science from the University of Minnesota, where he was a letterman on the track team during his senior year.

At first Minnesota schools held track meets on the baseball field at Shattuck, the state fair grounds and Lexington Park in St. Paul, and in similar makeshift locations. Later a dirt oval surrounding the drill field at Shattuck was used for track activities, but it was not until 1900 that the school built one of the first cinder tracks in the state. Shattuck's coach of that era, John A. Foster, is credited with bringing about the establishment of the cinder track and also the first modern indoor track facilities in the upper Midwest, constructed at the school in 1908. The University of Minnesota track team, including such famous athletes as Bernard Bierman, were to use the latter until the early 1920s, when the university at last constructed its own up-to-date indoor track.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Corton Carruth, *Encyclopedia of American Facts and Dates*, 211 (New York, 1962).

<sup>2</sup> John A. Foster, Sr., "Notes on Shattuck School Athletics," an unpagged manuscript in the possession of Mr. Foster, Faribault, Minnesota.

The primitive character of the early facilities apparently did not limit the students' enthusiasm or the variety of events listed on track programs. Shattuck's first field meet in June, 1872, included the 100-yard dash, half-mile race, high jump, three-legged race, ball throwing, and wheelbarrow and donkey races. The wheelbarrow and donkey races, according to the local newspaper, were "especially interesting."<sup>3</sup>

It was track athletes from the preparatory schools and high schools in Minnesota who provided the major source of talent for university and state college teams. An editorial in the *Minneapolis Tribune* of May 23, 1896, credited the secondary school graduates with a significant influence on the growth of track in the colleges, pointing out that "as the pupils in these graduate and enter college, they have taken their records and enthusiasm with them."

The vitality given to the sport at the secondary school level is indicated by St. Paul High School's first field day, held in 1892. It was considered "the greatest athletic event of the season."<sup>4</sup> Awards presented to contestants were donated by businessmen in the city. The winner of the running broad jump was given an umbrella, while the student who placed third in the hurdle race was awarded ten pounds of mixed nuts. Other prizes included a year's subscription to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, a banjo, a silver butter knife, a bunch of bananas, and a book of poetry. The school letter or trophy that would distinguish the champion was, for the most part, to come later. Shattuck, however, presented a silver cup to the winner of the half-mile race at the school's first meet.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Faribault Republican*, June 12, 1872.

<sup>4</sup> *Athletic News*, a publication of the St. Paul Athletic Association, April 8, 1892, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Athletic News*, May 12, 1892, p. 6; *Faribault Republican*, June 12, 1872.

<sup>6</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 7, 1893. Records and times are given as reported in the newspapers. In the early years times were generally recorded in fifths of a second, although the practice does not seem to have been standard at all meets. Times are now measured in tenths of a second.

BOTH HIGH SCHOOLS and colleges gradually came to use intramural field days as selecting devices to provide representative teams for interscholastic competition. One of the first interscholastic meets was held on June 6, 1893, when schools from Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Stillwater met at the state fair grounds. The record of events indicates that Central High School of Minneapolis won the 100-yard dash in 10 $\frac{1}{5}$  seconds, the standing high jump at 4 feet 2 inches, the mile run in 5 minutes 20 seconds, and the pole vault at 9 feet 4 inches. St. Paul High won the running high jump at 5 feet 2 inches, and the 440-yard dash in 60 and  $\frac{2}{5}$  seconds.<sup>6</sup>

A year later the *Minneapolis Tribune* of May 26, 1894, reported that Minneapolis Central was "as usual" the winner of the "Interscholastic Field Day" of Minnesota. This meet was noteworthy for its expansion of the competition to include a team representing Duluth and for a record-breaking 41-foot 6-inch shot put accomplished by a contestant from Minneapolis' South Side High School. According to the newspaper, "Professionals on the ground pronounced the toss as being far above the record made in high school contests." The mile was won in what was then the fast time of five minutes. The newspaper reported that "A mild dispute arose out of the mile run occasioned by the action of the Duluth men, who sent coaches into the stretch to urge their men in."

The *Tribune's* account of an 1898 interscholastic meet held at Lexington Park reveals the atmosphere prevailing during some early Minnesota high school track contests: "The audience numbering about 1,000 people was an enthusiastic and vigorous one. Horns played an active part and when lungs failed to decide the supremacy, some of the intellectual scions of education took to fighting. The police threw one or two of the combatants out of the gates, and the war fell back upon the lungs. Throughout the exercises the grounds were overrun by everybody, and noise was so continuous

that the officials had to go to each other to communicate the results. More discipline would do the boys good.”<sup>7</sup>

Shattuck drew national attention in 1911 when Foster’s team won the ninth annual Northwestern Interscholastic Association meet in Chicago, and again in 1915 when T. Cyril Kasper broke the national interscholastic half-mile record. Kasper covered the distance in 1 minute 58 seconds — only 2.3 seconds over the present state high school half-mile record, set in 1963 by Marty Benson of Minnetonka. Later in the same day, Kasper ran the 440 in 51.1 seconds.<sup>8</sup>

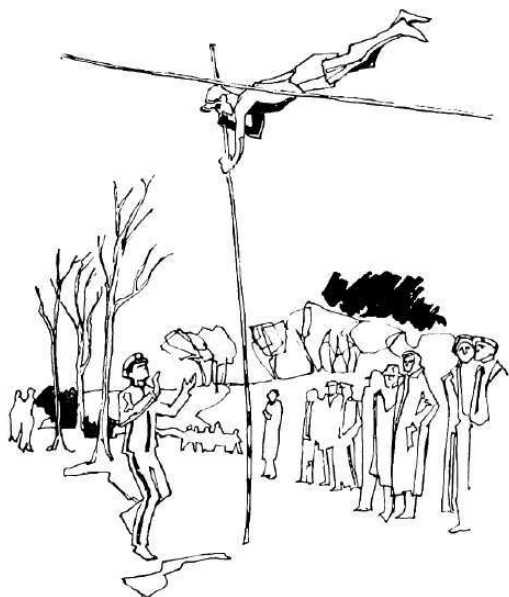
With times like these, it is not surprising that throughout the early history of track activities in the state, the high schools participated in meets with the colleges and universities. In fact, the high schools gave university teams close competition. The Gopher sophomores of 1905 were able to defeat a team made up of boys from Minneapolis’ East, North, and Central high schools by only 58–46. As early as 1892 Shattuck tried to set up a track and field competition with Carleton, St. Olaf, and Pillsbury colleges, all members with Shattuck of an intercollegiate baseball league. The effort was unsuccessful, and it was not

until four years later that Shattuck and Carleton held their first dual track meet. During the early 1900s the University of Minnesota became one of Shattuck’s chief rivals.<sup>9</sup>

UNIVERSITY track activities were confined principally to intramural field days during the 1880s. The athlete’s skills were rewarded with a variety of prizes that were to be replaced in time by the standard symbols of athletic achievement we know today. Winning contestants of the 1887 field day received boxing gloves, a five-volume set of Thomas B. Macaulay’s *History of England*, suspenders, a silk hat, a fishing rod, a nickle-mounted revolver, a gold pencil, and (no doubt with unintentional irony) a box of cigars.<sup>10</sup>

Even though a tug of war between members of different university classes on this occasion was considered “perhaps the most exciting contest,” by one newspaper reporter, most of the events on the field day schedules of those early years are still found on modern track programs.<sup>11</sup> Of technical interest is the early inclusion of the 16-pound shot (the same weight used today) and the ten hurdles of the 120-yard hurdle race. Distances and times recorded at such early intramural events were, however, well below today’s average high school performance.

The university’s first intercollegiate meet was held with Hamline and Carleton in 1882. The event was one of several sporadic attempts made to schedule intercollegiate competition before the 1890s. The meet, held at the state fair grounds, included the



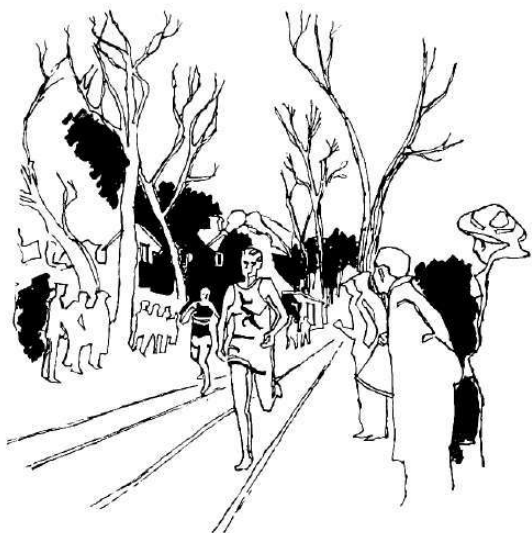
<sup>7</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 24, 1898. Lexington Park was located at the intersection of Lexington and University avenues. The site is now occupied by a shopping center.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, “Notes on Shattuck School Athletics”; *Mankato Free Press*, June 10, 1963, p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Faribault Republican*, April 13, 1892; Foster, “Notes on Shattuck School Athletics”; Minnesota High School League, *Official Handbook*, 1958, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 24, 1887.

<sup>11</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 24, 1887.



100-yard dash, quarter-mile race, mile walk, standing and running broad jumps, the 16-pound hammer throw, and the mile run. It was to be followed by a football game between Hamline and the university, a game scheduled to last forty-five minutes. However, according to the *Minneapolis Tribune* of October 1, 1882, the Hamline players were beaten twice in a half hour and decided to quit and go home.

Hamline and Carleton both played important parts in the development of track and field athletics in the state. Hamline's field days were reported regularly in the *Minneapolis Tribune* during the 1880s. The influence of students on the development of track at Carleton is evident from an article that appeared in an 1882 issue of the school's student magazine. "With the growing interest in athletic sports," it said, "a field-day would be a very appropriate way of exhibiting some of the pent-up spirit in our midst, before it overflows in more forbidden channels."<sup>12</sup>

Early in the 1890s Hamline, Carleton, and Macalester formed the Minnesota Field and Track Association. They held their first meet in 1893 at Kittsondale, a private race

track and stable owned by the Minnesota railroad magnate, Norman W. Kittson, in what is now the Midway area of St. Paul.<sup>13</sup> A report of the meet in the *Tribune* for May 31 reads: "The different colleges were there with their yells and colors, besides many [spectators] from the two cities. The grey and red of Hamline was most noticeable. The meeting was a grand success, especially being the first, and the records made were very good, being better than records made by the State University on Saturday. The handsome silver trophy given to the college winning the highest number of points was won by the Hamline boys with 60 points to their credit; Carleton came second with 48 points, Macalester not getting a single point."

Hamline won with the following scores: the 100-yard dash in 10 $\frac{3}{4}$  seconds; the mile in 4 minutes 57 seconds; the shot put, 32.2 feet; the running high jump, 5 feet  $\frac{1}{10}$  inch; the half-mile, 2 minutes 18 $\frac{1}{2}$  seconds; the running broad jump, 19 feet  $\frac{3}{10}$  inches; the 440-yard dash, 52 seconds; and the 120-yard hurdle race, 20 seconds. Carleton led in the 220-yard dash with a record of 24 $\frac{2}{5}$  seconds; in the pole vault with 8 feet 8 inches; in the hop, step, and jump with 40.6 feet; and in the hammer throw with 92.5 feet.

THE MODERN ERA of university track competition began with the founding of the Northwestern Intercollegiate League by Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Northwestern universities. It was established in 1893, the same year that the smaller colleges formed the Minnesota Field and Track Association. The Northwestern League provided the opportunity for the university to develop a regular schedule of intercollegiate track meets. The first was held in Chicago in 1893.

Minnesota's team, under the direction of Grant Rossman, participated in a three-day intramural contest to select the men who would represent the university in Chicago. The fourteen events scheduled for the in-

<sup>12</sup> *Carletonia*, 2:11 (September, 1882).

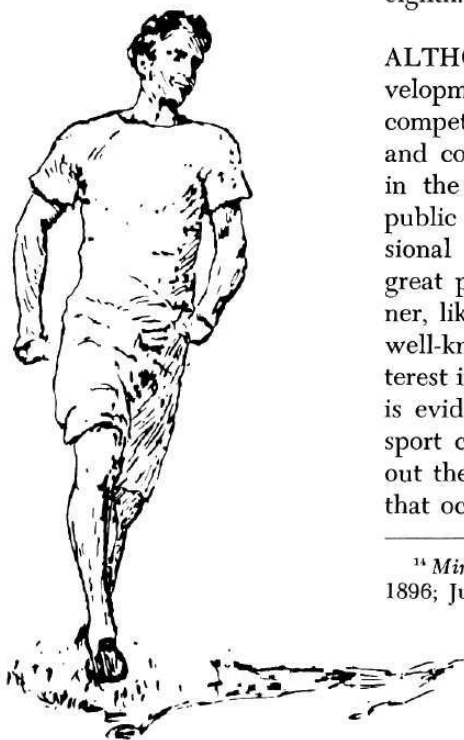
<sup>13</sup> *Minnesota History*, 37:43 (March, 1960). Kittsondale was located on the University Avenue site now occupied by Montgomery Ward, Brown and Bigelow, and several other firms.



tramural competition were held on the university's new circular cinder track, four laps to the mile, with a straightaway section that measured 440 feet. Hurdle races, high jumps, pole vaulting, the hammer throw, and mile races were listed on the program. The *Tribune* for May 19 described the intramural series as the most successful univer-

sity track activity held up to that time, but the journal also reported that the track was in "wretched" condition because it was still unfinished. Each contestant was required to achieve a specified record in order to qualify for the team. Eleven seconds, for example, was the maximum qualifying time for a contestant in the 100-yard dash.

The success of the intramurals evidently did not follow the Gophers to Chicago; in their first out-of-state intercollegiate meet they failed to score any points. Increasing opportunities for track competition and improved facilities helped to advance the sport, however, and three years later the university team broke all its previous records in four events during a meet with the Minneapolis Young Men's Christian Association. On this occasion the Gophers scored as follows: the 100-yard dash,  $10\frac{1}{5}$  seconds; the half-mile, 2 minutes  $11\frac{1}{5}$  seconds; the 220-yard dash,  $23\frac{1}{5}$  seconds; the 440-yard dash, 55 seconds; and the shot put, 38 feet 2 inches. By 1900 in the Western Intercollegiate Championships, the university competed with nineteen teams and placed eighth.<sup>14</sup>



ALTHOUGH the main impetus for the development of organized track and field competition came from the state's schools and colleges, it should also be noted that in the early years there was widespread public interest in this form of sport. Professional team sports had not yet achieved great popularity, but the professional runner, like the boxer and the wrestler, was a well-known phenomenon. Minnesota's interest in professional track during the 1880s is evident in reports that appeared in the sport columns of the newspapers throughout the period. They describe track events that occurred as far east as Pittsburgh and

<sup>14</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, June 4, 1893; May 24, 1896; June 3, 1900.



as far west as Redfield, South Dakota.<sup>15</sup> An example on the Minnesota scene occurred in 1888 when the *Minneapolis Tribune* of June 2 reported that "A sprinting match between two local sprinters for \$500.00 a side is being arranged, to occur on the baseball grounds some day next week. Both men have been training for the last three days."

Just as athletic clubs in the East promoted amateur track events open to the general public, Minnesota athletic organizations carried on a similar program in the years before the turn of the century. In 1884 the St. Paul Athletic Club sponsored a Memorial Day sports event at White Bear Lake, with participation open to amateurs only. The club offered three hundred dollars in prizes consisting of "Solid Gold and Silver Medals, Gold and Silver Cups and

Tankards" to winners of the various contests. A special feature of the afternoon was an exhibition by a professional runner in which he attempted "to equal the world record of  $7\frac{1}{4}$  seconds over a distance of 75 yards."<sup>16</sup> A similar field day was sponsored by the Phoenix Athletic Club of Wildwood near White Bear Lake in 1893.<sup>17</sup> These sporadic affairs were, however, frequently hampered by poor facilities—a disadvantage which became more noticeable as the area's schools and colleges began to acquire regular cinder tracks.

The importance of the club events and the influence of the professional runner cannot be measured in terms of the historical development of the sport, in contrast to the contribution of high school and college athletes, which follows a traceable pattern. With an enthusiasm that overcame inadequate facilities and with more vitality than systematic training, these youngsters laid the foundation for modern organized interscholastic league competitions. From the primitive beginnings on the baseball field at Shattuck to the present-day achievements, the sport, now almost a century old, has come a long way.

<sup>15</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 11, 1887.

<sup>16</sup> St. Paul Athletic Club announcement, May 30, 1884, in the pamphlet files of the Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>17</sup> *Minneapolis Tribune*, May 31, 1893.

LETTERING and design on the title page are by Celine Charpentier, as are the sketches on pages 20, 21, and 23. The illustrations on page 22 are from the University of Minnesota *Gopher* for 1903.





Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).