

FOUR HORSEMEN LED DAC TO TRACK GLORY

The athletic wave sweeping across America reached Detroit in the spring of 1887, when the new Detroit Athletic Club arose along Woodward Avenue at Canfield. Within its first two years, the club would produce the greatest sprinter of his time, three other national champions and a coach who led track and field athletes to glory in three Olympics.

Long before constant sports programming, before high school and college teams provided mass entertainment, amateur athletics was the only game in town. The DAC made national headlines when it hosted the Amateur Athletic Union's first major track and field day on September 19, 1888. Club president Frank Eddy, a sprinter who seldom missed his daily jog around the cinder track, was instrumental in the formation of the AAU, which governed the sport for over a century.

The fact that the AAU selected the year-old DAC as the venue for its first international contest was a coup. Thousands of spectators came to watch 120 talented athletes compete from clubs and colleges as distant as Cork, Ireland. While the DAC earned praise for managing the competition, its own athletes fared mediocre in the games. That would soon change.

By 1889, DAC co-founder Nate Williams, a graduate of Yale and a former manager of its baseball and football teams, had lured track coach Michael Murphy from his alma mater. Murphy brought the boundless energy and deft skills required to instill a young organization with vigor. Under his tutelage, a number of Detroit's up-and-coming businessmen were transformed into top amateur athletes. Heading the list were the "four horsemen"—John Owen, Harry Jewett, Fred Ducharme and Theodore Luce.

Owen, who came out of nowhere to establish a world record that stood for thirty-one years, offers the most incredible story. John Owen Jr. was born in Detroit on August 18, 1861, the son of a bank president who managed the Detroit Dry Dock Company, a premier shipbuilder. His mother, Jane Cook Owen, inherited a vast family farm that extended north from the Detroit River for miles.

Owen had no formal athletic training. He started to run at age twenty-eight, and his amateur career lasted only two years. But in that span, he won twenty-five 100-yard dashes, ten 220-yard races, two 440-yard contests and claimed a world record in the 100-yard dash as the first man to break ten seconds. Earning national titles in

1889 and 1890, Owen put Michigan on the map for track and field excellence. It was on the wave of his many victories that the DAC thrived. Inspired athletes worked hard and went for other championships.

At the club games in April 1889, sprinters Fred Ducharme, George Jerome, James Duffy and Owen won trials in the 100-yard dash, and Owen took the final in $10\frac{3}{5}$ seconds. Soon, Owen had shaved a fraction off that time.

The western AAU championships on June 15, 1889, gave Detroiters the first glimpse of speedy Luther Carey of Chicago, the reigning amateur who beat Owen in the 100-, 220- and 440-yard dashes. Little did Carey know that his records would soon be shattered.

With the arrival of Murphy that June, incredible things started to happen. The coach later recalled first seeing Owen: "He was about five feet, seven inches and only 128 pounds. He had never worn a running shoe and furthermore admitted he was 29. I laughed when they told me this fellow had any speed. But the minute I saw him move over the cinders I knew that I had found a wonder. He had a bounding stride that covered great distance."

In Pittsburgh on June 29, and later in Chatham, Ontario, Owen won sprints. On July 24, he won the Frank Eddy handicap challenge. He actually ran the 100-yard dash in less than ten seconds in August 1889 on the DAC field, but the record was disqualified for a reason lost to history.

Owen's style was to run the first and last twenty yards faster than anyone, but his pace in the middle always was slower. His passion willed him to take running as far as possible. In business, he was much the same. As president of the Cook Farm Company, he conceived the idea for Indian Village, a neighborhood designed by Detroit's leading architects with mansions built along wide, leafy boulevards. It remains one of the city's best districts.

Murphy was fond of saying that had he trained Owen at age eighteen, he would have put the records for the 100-, 220- and 440-yard dashes where no man would ever touch them again.



Legendary track coach Mike Murphy and star DAC sprinter John Owen. *DAC archives.*

At Travers Island, New York, in 1889, Owen won the 100 in 10.4 and the 220 in 23.6 seconds. Charter DAC member John Lodge, in a memoir, recalled how Murphy hoisted Owen on his back and carried him over wet turf that day after all the other sprinters had started across the soggy grass. Murphy intended to place the club's representative on the cinders with clean, bright spikes, which may have been instrumental to his success.

The pinnacle of Owen's racing career occurred on October 11, 1890, on an island in the Potomac River. Owen's historic race took place at the AAU championships on Analostan Island, a pear-shaped mass opposite Georgetown and almost in the shadow of the Washington Monument.

The field had Luther Carey of Princeton, the fastest collegian, and Fred Westing of the New York Athletic Club, the fastest of club sprinters. Also in the finals were two 10.5-second men.

As the starter pistol rang out, Owen got away to a three-foot lead over Carey. Carey nearly made up the lost ground, but Owen regained speed and finished a foot ahead of him. All four timers clocked him at 9.8 seconds.

An Associated Press report said that the crowd went silent. The momentary pause of incredulity was broken by a prolonged burst of applause, and Owen was carried away on his admirers' shoulders. Telegraphs wired the news: "Owen of Detroit has broken the world's record for 100-yards." And he did so from an upright standing start instead of the crouch position that all sprinters later adopted.

Owen's performance was hailed as the most wonderful exhibition of sprinting ever seen in amateur contests. There was no opposition to admitting the time as a record, as it was on a level track later re-measured at one hundred yards and one inch. All other names were erased from the record books, as Owen stood as the premier amateur 100-yard runner of the world.

The greeting he received at home was unprecedented. At least one thousand fans greeted the sprinter at the Michigan Central Depot. The city's first official sports champion was carried from the station to the DAC Clubhouse behind a torchlight procession.

After his world record, Owen, by now a married father and active businessman, decided to retire from racing. Later, he humbly deflected praise by saying that he was lucky or by crediting his wins to Murphy. Owen died in August 1924 after a horseback riding accident at his summer home on Mackinac Island.

His record of 9.8 seconds in the 100-yard dash stood for thirty-one years until Charles Paddock of the Los Angeles Athletic Club ran it in 9.6. The 100-yard dash had given way to the 100-meter competition in most major meets by the 1930s.