

Pieces of Iowa's Past, published by the Iowa State Capitol Tour Guides monthly, features historical facts about Iowa, the Capitol, and the early workings of state government. All italicized text/block quotes in this document are taken directly from historical publications with the actual spelling, punctuation, and grammar retained.

John L. Griffith and the Drake Relays

Several weeks ago, Drake University hosted one of the most iconic events of track and field in the United States. Held annually at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, the Drake Relays holds with it a rich tradition of excellence. Since its inception in 1910, the Relays have evolved into one of the most prestigious gatherings in the world of track and field, attracting top-tier athletes from across the globe. With a history steeped in iconic moments and record-breaking performances, the Drake Relays continue to captivate audiences and inspire generations with its unwavering dedication to the pursuit of athletic greatness. This *Pieces of Iowa's Past* highlights the origins and milestones of the Drake Relays.

John L. Griffith

The Drake Relays originated from the mind of John L. Griffith, Drake's athletic director and, later, the Big Ten Conference's first commissioner. Before coming to Drake, Griffith was involved in coaching and administration at Yankton College in South Dakota and Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. While coaching football and track at Drake, he founded the Drake Relays, one of the first multiday track-and-field carnivals and the first track carnival in the Midwest.¹

At the turn of the twentieth century, track and field was a national growing interest, along with athletes participating in different combinations of sports. The rivalries ironically would force attempts at cooperation across

¹ Matthew Lindaman. *Fit for America: Major John L. Griffith and the Quest for Athletics and Fitness*. Syracuse University Press; 2018.

institutions and consequently serve as the creation of conferences.² Since track and field takes place during the spring, meets served as a reason for promoters of intercollegiate sport and physical culture to gather at the end.

John Griffith came to Drake University in 1908 to be the school's athletic director, but he also coached football, track and field, and baseball. As the track and field coach, Griffith felt that the athletes were not interested in track earlier in the season. The team could attend indoor meets; however, the closest meets were in St. Louis, Kansas City, and Omaha, which would require travel and other expenses that were out of the team's budget. Instead, to change the mindset and conjure excitement, he invited colleges and high schools to take part in an early outdoor meet that he called the Drake Relay Carnival.³



John L. Griffith, ca. 1920s.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2014714877/>

Annual Drake Relays



The Des Moines Register; April 24, 1910.

The first meet took place on April 13, 1910, during a snowstorm with roughly 100 spectators and 82 athletes. Runners from Drake, Simpson College, Highland Park College, Des Moines College, three high schools, several Drake literary societies and class organizations, and a scattering of Sunday School classes participated in the first Drake Relays.⁴

Griffith wanted it to be bigger and better the next year. In preparation for the second annual Drake Relays, Griffith got in touch with some of the biggest coaching names in the Midwest: Harry Gill of the University of Illinois, Alonzo Stagg of the University of Chicago, and Tom E. Jones of the

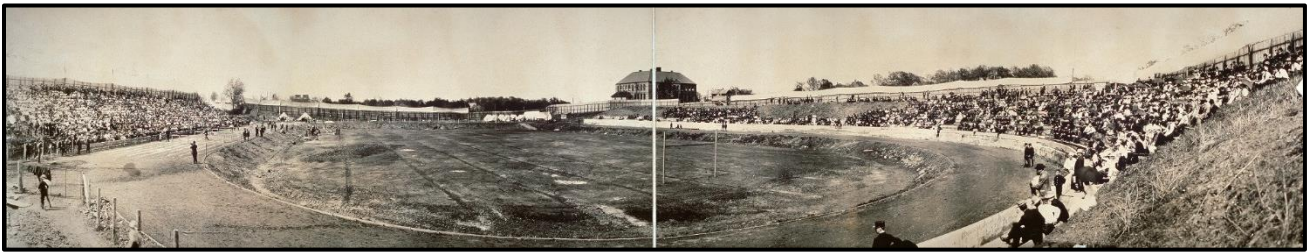
² Matthew Lindaman. *Fit for America: Major John L. Griffith and the Quest for Athletics and Fitness*. Syracuse University Press; 2018.

³ Robert H. Spiegel. *Drake Relays; 75 Years of Excellence*, "The First Fifty Years." Drake University, 1985. Special Collections, Cowles Library, Drake University. <http://ddr.lib.drake.edu/digital/collection/du-relays/id/1054>

⁴ Ibid.

University of Wisconsin. Visiting schools signed contracts, assuring Griffith that the schools would send their best athletes to stock the relay teams, which allowed Drake to produce advance advertising that would assure competitive, high-caliber racing.⁵ A dinner was also introduced during the 1911 Relays to further friendships and exchange ideas, which contributed to the event's longevity. Each spring, more major track and field schools entered. Nebraska, Minnesota, and Wisconsin joined between 1912 and 1914. Purdue and Michigan took part in 1915.⁶

Milestones



Haskins Field, ca. 1907. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2007663638/>.

In 1922, the Relays expanded into a two-day meet, and in 1923, the Relays were moved to the last weekend in April. The 1925 Drake Relays were the last to take place on Haskins Field, which was built in 1904, with the track five feet above the football field. There was no adjoining fieldhouse, so tents serving as dressing rooms dotted the infield. The seating capacity was listed between 7,000 and 12,000. It was time for an upgrade with the growing number of spectators and participants. Drake stadium, a concrete and brick horseshoe seating 18,500 was ready for the 1926 Relays, and the following year, a new fieldhouse was added right next door.

In 1922, the Relays were broadcast over the radio for the first time in American track and field history. One reason the Drake Relays appealed to people over radio and television was its split-second schedule, something that is still a staple to this day. This added immeasurably to the meet, eliminating dead spots that were so common in track and field competition.⁷

The allure of the Drake Relays was cemented with the name of one of

⁵ Matthew Lindaman. *Fit for America: Major John L. Griffith and the Quest for Athletics and Fitness*. Syracuse University Press; 2018.

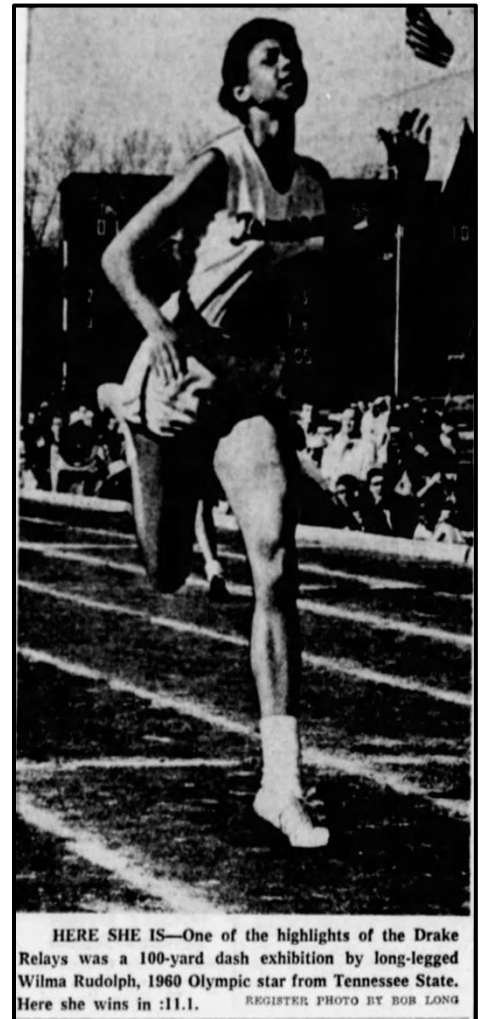
⁶ Robert H. Spiegel. *The Drake Relays; 50 Golden Years*, It all started as a "Drake Relay Carnival" ...the year...1910. Drake University, 1959. Special Collections, Cowles Library, Drake University. <http://content.library.drake.edu/digital/collection/du-relays/id/776/rec/1>

⁷ Ibid.

the top athletes of all time, Jesse Owens. As an Ohio State sophomore, Owens dominated the oval in 1935. After winning the 100-yard dash, Owens was called to the broad jump. He jumped 26 feet for the first time in his career. The official reading was 26-1 $\frac{3}{4}$ in establishing an American record and less than an inch off the world record. Even more impressive, Owens took off nine inches before reaching the takeoff board, which is eight inches wide. This means that Owens actually jumped 17 inches further than the existing record.⁸ Jesse Owens was named Drake Relays Athlete of the Half Century in 1959.

It wasn't until 1961 that women's events debuted at the Relays. Wilma Rudolph, winner of three gold medals at the 1960 Olympics in Rome, the most famous female athlete of the time, ran in the first Drake Relays event for women, the 100-meter dash.⁹

The Drake Relay's iconic blue oval was not blue until the summer of 1989. The track was resurfaced in Drake's school colors, featuring a combination of polyurethane coating and EPDM rubber granules.¹⁰



Wilma Rudolph. The Des Moines Register; April 30, 1961.

2024 Drake Relays

Records were broken this year in the high school men's 4x800 by Ankeny, women's 4x800 by Pleasant Valley, and men's shuttle hurdle relay by Cedar Falls, as well as in the collegiate women's distance medley relay by Notre Dame, men's distance medley relay by Bradley, and men's 4x100 by

⁸ "The World's Best Perform at Drake Stadium," *Drake Stadium History*. Drake Athletics website. May 24, 2007. https://godrakebulldogs.com/news/2007/5/24/drake_stadium_history.aspx#:~:text=The%20Jim%20Duncan%20Track%20was,coating%20and%20EPDM%20rubber%20granules.

⁹ Chuck Schoffner. "Drake Celebrates 50th Anniversary of First Women's Event Featuring Wilma Rudolph." *Track & Field News*. April 27, 2011. <https://web.archive.org/web/20150204122408/http://www.trackandfieldnews.com/index.php/display-article?arId=57446>

¹⁰ "The World's Best Perform at Drake Stadium," *Drake Stadium History*. Drake Athletics website. May 24, 2007. https://godrakebulldogs.com/news/2007/5/24/drake_stadium_history.aspx#:~:text=The%20Jim%20Duncan%20Track%20was,coating%20and%20EPDM%20rubber%20granules.

Kentucky.¹¹

Perhaps the highlight of this year's Relays was Lolo Jones competing in the World Athletic Continental Tour 100-meter hurdle race. Although Jones did not finish with a time to qualify for the Olympic Trials, she hit a personal season best of 13.11 seconds.¹² The three-time Olympian and Des Moines native was inducted into the Drake Relays Athletes Hall of Fame April 25.

Jones began her track career at Roosevelt High School in Des Moines, setting an Iowa state track meet record in the 100 hurdles. She continued her career at Louisiana State University (LSU).¹³

Conclusion

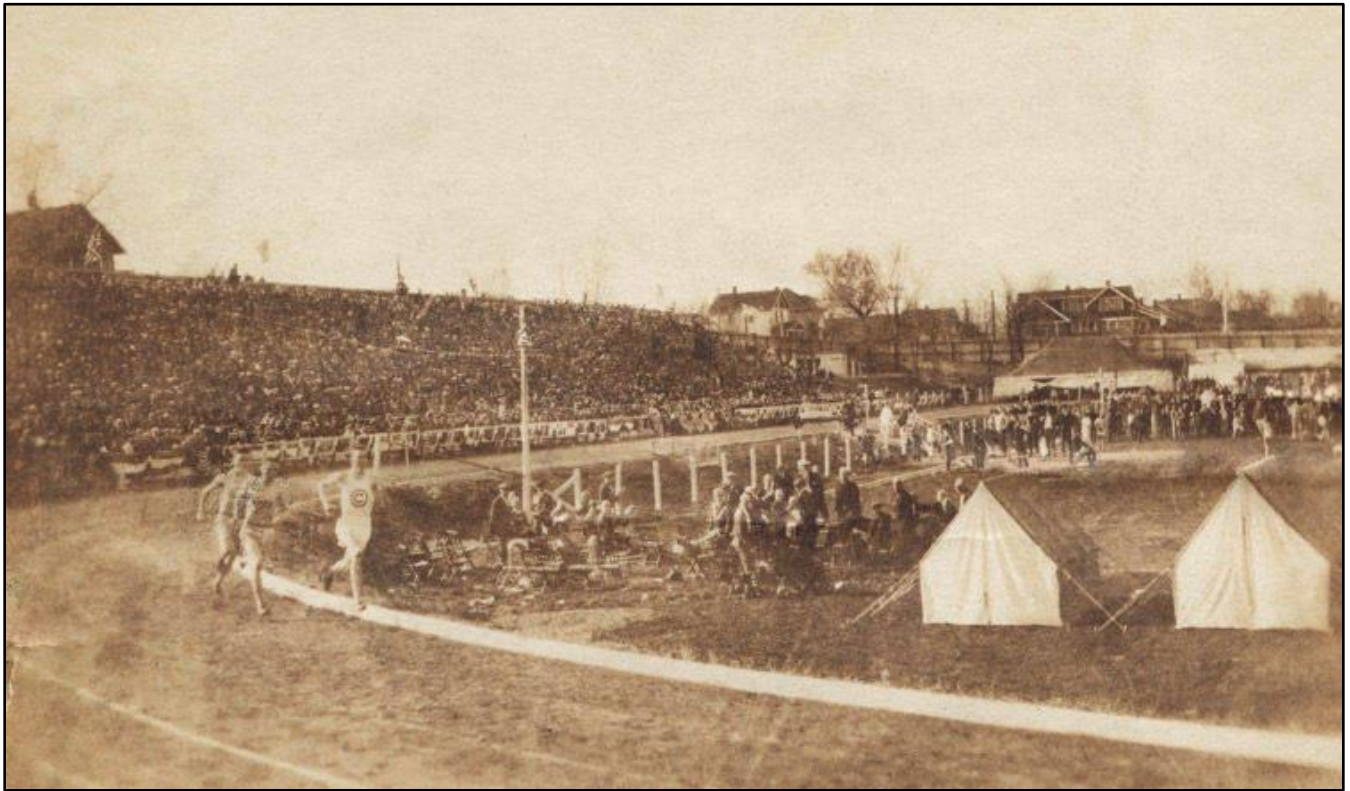
The Drake Relays stands as a beacon of athletic talent and a testament to the enduring spirit of competition. Year after year, this event brings together athletes, coaches, and fans, fostering a sense of unity and excitement that transcends borders and generations. With each passing iteration, the legacy of the Drake Relays grows ever stronger, ensuring that its impact will be felt for years to come, inspiring countless more to reach for the stars and push the boundaries of human achievement.

Looking ahead, the anticipation builds for the Iowa High School Boys and Girls State Track Meet, where talent from throughout the state will take center stage May 16 to 18, 2024. As communities rally behind their athletes, the state meet promises thrilling competition and memorable moments. It's a time for dreams to be realized, records to be broken, and lifelong memories to be made.

¹¹ "Check out some of the records broken Saturday at the Drake Relays," Dargan Souhard. *Des Moines Register*. April 27, 2024. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/sports/high-school/2024/04/27/check-out-some-of-the-records-broken-saturday-at-the-drake-relays/73458223007/>

¹² "Olympic dreams, Des Moines homecoming on display for Lolo Jones at Drake relays," Alyssa Hertel. *Des Moines Register*. April 27, 2024. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/sports/college/drake/drake-relays/2024/04/27/lolo-jones-puts-on-performance-for-hometown-crowd-at-drake-relays/73474224007/>

¹³ "Lolo Jones Set to be Enshrined in Drake Relays Athletes Hall of Fame," Drake Athletic Communications. April 10, 2024. <https://godrakebulldogs.com/news/2024/4/10/lolo-jones-set-to-be-enshrined-in-drake-relays-athletes-hall-of-fame.aspx>



Drake Relays on Haskin Field, ca. 1910s.

<http://content.library.drake.edu/digital/collection/du-relays/id/625/rec/4>