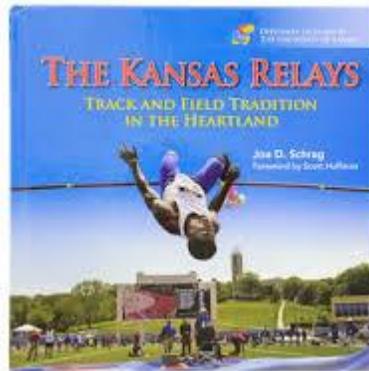


the kansas relays

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When I was growing up in Lawrence, Kansas in the sixties, the Kansas Relays were an important event on the spring sports schedule, the April mid-point of the Triple Crown relays circuit, along with the Texas and Drake Relays. My grade-school friends and I would glimpse Jim Ryun doing practice runs in our neighborhood and try to emulate his long strides running laps around the playground at school until our teachers told us to play with the other kids, socialize. I regularly attended the Relays and remember 1968 vividly watching Charlie Greene tie the world record in the 100 meters (10.0) and cheering Jim Ryun as he anchored (3:57) the KU Distance Medley Relay team to a world record. Like many young Lawrencians, I dreamed of running in the Kansas Relays, although the closest I ever got was to hold SIU sprinter Ivory Crockett's sweats for him as he blazed a fast 200, when I was a student volunteer in high school.

Former Topeka West track coach and English teacher, Joe Schrag picked a good time to write a history of the Kansas Relays since 2014 was the year the Relays moved permanently from its traditional site, Memorial Stadium on the KU campus, to Rock Chalk Park, a state-of -the-art facility with a Class 1 certification (255) west of town. *The Kansas Relays* is filled with historical background,

statistics and beautiful photographs and carefully chronicles the long history of this event, first conceived, according to Schrag, by football legend John Outland and basketball coaching legend Phog Allen (5). From 1923 to 2013 the Kansas Relays were held at Memorial Stadium annually, except during World War II and during stadium renovations.

The Kansas Relays is divided into four parts ("Tradition," "Moments," "Action," and "Innovation"). "Moments" has some compelling stories regarding ultra-runners, the Tarahumara, in 1927; KU distance runner Wes Santee's attempts to break the 4-minute mile barrier before Bannister and others did; and the Soviets bringing a world-class team to the Relays in 1983. Unfortunately, Schrag's writing style made "Action" (chapters on different categories of events: distance, sprints, etc.) the least compelling in the end. Giving year-by-year winners in each event in paragraph form didn't work for me. Each chapter in "Action" did have a nice listing of Relays competitors who competed in the Olympics, including event, country of origin, and medal(s) won. The list of KU athletes alone who went on to be Olympians is amazing (including medalists such as Ryun, Billy Mills, Al Oerter, Cliff Cushman, Bill Nieder, Diamond Dixon), but it's still a short list in comparison to the staggering number of Olympians overall who competed at the Kansas Relays, from the 1920 Olympics on (100).

Sprinkled into Schrag's book, the most compelling stories of the Relays are those told in the words of individual athletes, memories of their experiences by pole vaulter Scott Huffman, related in his forward to the book; and distance runner Jim Ryun. Perhaps the most poignant story is of KU hurdler Cliff Cushman, a silver medalist in the 1960 Olympics who failed to qualify for the '64 Olympics after falling in the trials, then was shot down over Vietnam in 1966 and declared M.I.A (66). Cushman wrote a letter to the youth in his hometown of Grand Forks, Nebraska, after his disappointment at the '64 Trials, which opened, "Don't feel sorry for me. I feel sorry for some of you!" and then implored the youth to strive to be better: "Unless your reach exceeds your grasp, how can you be sure what you can attain? " (66-67) Pointing out their generation is taller, heavier and wealthier "than any past generation in this

country" (68), Cushman challenged these youth: "I dare you to become physically fit. I dare you to read a book that is not required in school. I dare you to look up at the stars, not down at the mud, and set your sights on one of them that, up to now, you thought was unattainable" (68). Cushman shows he learned to do more than hurdle as a student at the University of Kansas.

The Kansas Relays does document well how much keeping the Relays going for 87 years has challenged its organizers, especially since the significance of the Triple Crown of Relays has diminished with other track meets siphoning off much of the collegiate talent in the last few decades since its peak years in the 1960s and '70s. From integrating the high-school and college events into one meet early on, rather than holding them as separate meets, to paying professionals, to hosting key field events (shot put/long jump) on a downtown Lawrence street, organizers have tried it all. With the move away from Memorial Stadium in the heart of the KU campus to a brand-new facility on the outskirts of Lawrence, the Kansas Relays is set to begin a new era. I will miss slipping away from my campus office to watch the 4-mile relay or distance medley relay down at the stadium as I did when my son and his Lawrence High teammates were competing in them. But a state-of-the-art track beckons. The athletes are bound to follow, and records will fall. Cue the *Field of Dreams* music, if you like.

Joe D. Schrag. *The Kansas Relays: Track and Field Tradition in the Heartland*. Flagstaff: Adina Publishing, 2014. 292 pp. \$34.95.

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