

History of the Easterns

It was in 1934 that the Amateur Athletic Union first held an interscholastic meet at the old Madison Square Garden on 50th Street and 8th Avenue. There had been a “national” championship held earlier at the Newark Armory under the auspices of the St. Benedict’s Prep, a charter member of the New Jersey Catholic Track Conference, but it is from the Garden meet that the meet you’re attending today - The Easterns - draws its lineage.

The meet remained at the Garden until 1965, when the AAU decided to take its championships on the road for a couple of years. The 1934 meet had just one division, won by Jimmy Curran’s team at Mercersburg Academy, located in remote, rural Central Pennsylvania, about 75 miles southwest of Harrisburg. It was under Curran’s tutelage that several world-class athletes developed at Mercersburg, including 800-meter run world record holder Ted Meredith.

In 1935, the meet split into two divisions - high school and prep school. The two divisions united again in 1955 with post-graduates banned. In 1966, the meet moved to the 168th Street Armory in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan and remained there until 1972 under the auspices first of the New York Catholic High School Athletic Association, then of the Staten Island Coaches Association.

For 44 years - from 1934 through 1977 - Easterns even had team scoring, with schools from New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Virginia taking turns winning.

In 1973, a conflict of dates caused the meet to be cancelled. It was then that the New Jersey Catholic Track Conference stepped in and took over, moving the meet to Princeton University’s Jadwin Gym. The Easterns, as the meet was now known, soon became the premiere indoor high school track meet in the nation.

In 1980, the girls Easterns debuted in Boston and continued there until 1996, when it merged with the boys meet and, under the jurisdiction of the Bergen County Track Coaches Association, was held for one year at Princeton before moving back into 168th Street Armory, now newly refurbished and boasting one of the world’s fastest banked 200-meter tracks.

Among the Olympic gold medalists who have competed over the years at Easterns are 1979 long jump winner Carl Lewis and 1991 300-yard dash winner Lamont Smith, both of Willingboro. Other former Olympians who’ve won Easterns titles are 1979 high jump champ Milton Goode of Monmouth Regional; 1982 high hurdles winner Luis Morales of Oxon Hill., Md.; Alberto Salazar of Wayland, Mass., who has held the two-mile meet record for 32 years; 1977 mile winner John Tuttle of Alfred-Almond, N.Y.; and 1980 and 1981 1,000-yard run winner John Marshall of Plainfield; and Willingboro’s Carol Lewis, who still holds the meet record in the long jump.

Tonight, the Easterns enjoys its 79th boys meet, 36th girls meet and 80th overall edition. The oldest indoor high school track meet in the country is just getting started!