

History of the Armory

On Dec. 19, 1909, hundreds of people lined Fort Washington Avenue between 167th and 168th Street to celebrate the opening of the 22nd Regiment of Engineers Armory. The facility, built at a cost of \$1 million to house the National Guard, replaced an aging armory at Broadway and 68th Street and included a swimming pool and bowling alley.

“This structure will surpass in excellence as a military home any armory in the state or in the United States,” acting New York mayor McGowan announced that chilly day.

Today, more than a century later, the Armory is unsurpassed in excellence as a home not for the military but for track and field.

The Armory became a mecca for the New York running community in the 1940s, hosting high school championship meets and world-class competitions, featuring stars like pole vaulter Sabin Carr, quarter-miler Ray Barbuti and sprinter Allan Woodring - all Olympic gold medalists.

But the Armory fell into disrepair in the 1970s, when city officials began housing homeless men and women on its lower levels. The track meets continued, but in 1986, the runners booted out entirely so the city could turn the Armory into a full-time shelter.

But in the early 1990s, an ambitious group of track devotees plotted the revival of the Armory.

“We’re trying to get back in there,” Dr. Norbert Sander told *The New York Times* in a story that appeared on July 29, 1991.

Sander, who had competed at the Armory while running for Fordham, put together the Armory Foundation, an ambitious non-profit group that set out to reclaim and refurbish the Armory with private money so the youth of New York and the surrounding areas could have a great place to run and train. And in 1993, the Armory re-opened with a world-class Mondo track that sits atop the historic old flat track. A new era in East Coast track was born.

In the 15 years since, the Armory has hosted more than 1,000 track meets and another generation of Olympians. In 2002, the National Track and Field Hall of Fame moved in and now occupies three floors in the once-decrepit building.

The Armory is now busier than ever in its second century of activity.

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.; 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.

This year, the Easterns enjoys its 73rd boys meet, 31st girls meet and 76th overall edition. The oldest indoor high school track meet in the country is just getting started!