

John Owen Jr. - Detroit 1879



In the years before high school sports, the prime mover of track & field in Detroit was the Detroit Athletic Club and its coach, Mike Murphy. His most famous athlete was John Owen Jr., the world's fastest man.

The first day he saw Owen, Murphy wasn't impressed. For starters, Owen was far older than the other athletes. And he was hardly an athletic specimen. Recalled Murphy, "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."

In April 1889 Owen won the 100-yard dash at the DAC Games in 10.6. In June at the Western AAU, he was beaten in the 100, 220 and 440 by Chicago star Luther Carey. Then he started winning. At an August race in Detroit reportedly broke 10 seconds in the 100, faster than the World Record, but the mark was wind-aided.

In 1890, he ran 10.4 and 23.6 in the short sprints in New York. On October 11, at the AAU National Championships in Washington, D.C., he made history. Facing the nation's best, Owen got out to a quick lead but the rest of the field soon pulled even. Then he put on his trademark finishing speed and crossed the line two feet ahead. Six timers caught him in 9.8, a new World Record.

Baltimore Sun: "The 100-yard record had been an iron-clad one for so long that its destruction was hardly anticipated except by John Owen's most intimate friends, who had accompanied him from Detroit to see him accomplish the feat."

Detroit Free Press: "Such a hustling of feet has never been seen."

Owen was the first man to break the 10-second barrier and his record lasted for 31 years. His coach, Mike Murphy, said that if he had been able to train Owen from age 18, he would have set World Records in the 100, 220 and 440 that would last for decades.

Owen retired after his record. Born into wealth (he apparently attended the elementary school named for his father), he soon went into the world of business. Among his other ventures, he came up with the concept of Indian Village, one of Detroit's most exclusive neighborhoods. He died on August 25, 1924 after a horseback riding accident; he was 63.