

# THE PALIMPSEST

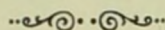
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## First in the Mile Relay

"The next e-event", sang the announcer of the Tenth Annual Kansas City Athletic Club Indoor Meet, "is the one mile re-elay. Running in lane number one, Mor-row of I-oway; in lane two, Shan-non of Kan-sas."

"Are you ready?" called the starter, as the two runners nervously took their places. They nodded automatically.

"To your marks. . . Now get set. . ."  
Bang!

The athletes shot from their marks as though their lives depended on the outcome of the race. Around the board track they sped, now shortening, now lengthening their strides, weaving in and out in order to miss the patches of tin which splotched the indoor track of the Kansas City Coliseum. For a few seconds the race was even. Then the stocky, smooth-striding runner in the



black jersey forged ahead. It was Harry C. Morrow, a junior dental student from the University of Iowa. Morrow held the State record in the half-mile run and his endurance had often proved valuable to the Iowa team. With a final spurt he passed the baton to Iowa's second runner with a three yard lead over his Kansas opponent.

Gerhard B. Noll, running next for Iowa, could be expected to hold his place of advantage. He was "a large wiry fellow" who had tremendous lung capacity and plenty of speed. With long machine-like strides he maintained the lead that Morrow had won and by means of a perfect baton pass he sent the third Iowa runner, Eric C. Wilson, off to an unusually fast start.

Wilson was no ordinary athlete. Later in the season, the *Detroit News* declared that the captain of the Iowa team, then in his third year of varsity competition, was the "fastest 220 and 440 man alive." Tall and graceful, he ran with "a smooth easy motion" and always seemed to have more strength in reserve. Apparently without exertion Wilson gradually pulled away from his Kansas rival and, with a brilliant burst of speed, finished his quarter mile over ten yards in the lead.

Charles R. Brookins, the Iowa anchor runner,



was an exceptionally fast starter, and as Wilson handed him the baton he leaped ahead to gain several additional yards. Brookins was a flashy runner, even in the 440, though he showed his form to best advantage as a hurdler. With the race apparently won, Brookins nevertheless sprinted through a fast quarter mile to break the tape for a new meet record of three minutes, twenty-nine and four-fifths seconds.

The mile relay was the climax of the meet. Inasmuch as the event had not been staged until eleven o'clock at night, however, the coach and the team "had to run another race to catch the train home."

The Iowa relay team had made an auspicious start for the season of 1923. Although none of the runners was naturally a quarter miler, George T. Bresnahan, Iowa's nervously dynamic coach, had recognized the possibility of combining speed and endurance in the selection of Morrow, Noll, Wilson, and Brookins to bear the colors of Old Gold in the relay meets. Moreover, Coach Bresnahan had conceived of the non-visual baton pass and perfected the technique of a runner accepting the baton from an incoming runner without looking back. This enabled the exchange to be made while both runners were going at full speed, a great advantage to Iowa relay teams.



One week after the Kansas victory, the Iowa quartet of Chan F. Coulter (running for Morrow), Noll, Brookins, and Wilson easily defeated a Wisconsin team and set a new Armory record of three minutes and thirty-four seconds for the mile relay. Coulter finished a step ahead of his opponent, "Noll was far in the lead on his lap, Brookins widened the gap still more, and then captain Wilson aided in setting a new record by stepping off his stuff in great shape." Thus far, however, the potential strength of the team had not been severely tested.

Spring was in the air on March 3, 1923, when five thousand spectators crowded into the huge Armory at Urbana to witness the Illinois Indoor Relay Carnival, as nearly six hundred athletes representing forty-seven colleges and universities vied for supremacy in "the fastest meet in the history of the carnival." The mile relay proved to be the feature event of the games. Morrow, running first for Iowa in the outside lane, got away to a bad start, but was gaining rapidly on the leading Chicago man as he passed the baton to Noll who started at full speed and kept that pace the entire distance. Brookins, running third for Iowa, was away in front like a flash and never was headed. Wilson, who had just run two heats of the special three hundred yard dash, took the



responsibility of the final quarter. Could he hold the advantage gained by his teammates? The crowd was in an uproar as the Chicago anchor man strove desperately to overtake the flying Iowa captain. But his efforts were unavailing, and Wilson finished fifteen yards ahead of the nearest rival. "And the time", called the announcer, "was three minutes and twenty-six seconds. A new re-relay rec-ord!"

A dual meet with the University of Illinois on the afternoon of March tenth proved to be little more than a practice session for the fleet Hawkeye relay team. The most decisive test came the following week in the Western Conference Indoor Track and Field Meet held in Patten Gymnasium at Evanston, Illinois. There again Iowa met the challenge of the fast Chicago team and the potential threat of other contenders. The results of event after event were chalked up on the score board until only the mile relay remained on the program. Chicago and Iowa were tied for fourth place. The final race would decide the issue between them.

At the start, Morrow gave Noll a ten yard advantage, and Noll gained five more. The widely-heralded Chicago team failed to keep the pace set by the fast-stepping Hawkeyes. But the third Illinois man, with an almost superhuman effort,



picked up the lost ground and passed Brookins! Had the Iowans met their masters in a team they had twice beaten during the year? Stride for stride the slender Iowan matched his leader's pace around the curve, and then, seeing his opportunity, streaked past the Illini runner on the back stretch. Exhausted by his early effort, H. M. Fitch, the Illinois star who was later an Olympic runner, was unable to accept the challenge of a final sprint. Brookins passed the baton to Wilson with a fifteen yard lead. From that time the outcome of the race was never in doubt, and Wilson broke the tape just three minutes and twenty-nine and three-fifths seconds after the bark of the starting gun. It was the fifth successive victory for the Iowa team and gave them the indoor one mile relay title of the Middle West.

Early in April intensive preparation was begun for the outdoor meets. Stimulated by the success of the indoor season and a big drive for additional track men, scores of ambitious athletes crowded the Armory every afternoon. Conspicuous among them was the mile relay quartet. In the early-season races, the men had gained confidence and developed a remarkable team spirit. It was noticed that they always warmed up together, that they had no use for wintergreen liniment, and that they practiced regularly and



kept in good condition. To further insure physical fitness, Dr. Walter Fieseler, the medical advisor, insisted that Iowa City water be taken with the Hawkeyes on their trips. Meals, too, were carefully planned, and baked potatoes, peas, hard bread, beef, and similar substantial foods found a predominant place on the menu.

“ ‘We’re from Ioway, I-o-way,’ chorused a delegation of husky athletes from the Hawkeye state as they left the Kansas stadium at the close of the first Kansas relay meet Saturday afternoon [April 21st], carrying with them trophies won in ten different events in the meet.” And of the Hawkeyes, the mile relay quartet had sparkled most brilliantly. Because of Friday’s rains, the Kansas track was soft, and the fact that the relay event appeared last on the program made matters doubly bad. However, the Iowa team drew lane number one — always a distinct advantage in the days when the system of rotating lanes was not yet in use.

With the crack of the gun the men were away from their marks. At three hundred yards Morrow trailed his opponents by at least five yards, and Iowa fans began to fear the outcome. Trexler of Nebraska and Westermeyer of Kansas were both 220 yard dash men, however, and Morrow’s endurance swung the balance in his



favor. On the last curve he stretched his stride and, slipping by the tiring Nebraska and Kansas men, passed the baton to Noll for a five yard advantage. On the back stretch Noll increased the lead to fifteen yards and Brookins picked up five more. Not content with this Wilson ran a splendid forty-eight and four-tenths quarter to cross the finish line forty yards ahead of his nearest competitor. Considering the soggy track and the fact that it was Iowa's first outdoor performance, it was a brilliant exhibition of running and of team work.

That the Drake Relays on April 28th were to be the big event of the year there could be no doubt. It was reported from Des Moines that "for weeks a corps of men have groomed the oval as carefully as though preparing it for a king." Certainly royalty was to be there! Had not the Iowa relay combination proved to be the best running team in the West? Since the Kansas victory sports writers had been unreserved in praise and now they were to try for their seventh straight victory — traditionally the most important of the entire year.

Nearly ten thousand eager fans thronged the gates of the Drake stadium on the day of the meet and among the number were over four hundred Iowa partisans who occupied a special sec-



tion of the stands and rooted for a Hawkeye triumph. They were not to be disappointed, for in a carnival in which "records came tumbling down like autumn leaves" the Iowa team ran "the fastest mile relay that has been stepped in many years." Each member of the quartet contributed his best effort of the year, and when the timers' watches were checked the announcer proclaimed that the Iowa team had set a new world's intercollegiate record. Illinois, the closest competitor, had been left fifty yards in the rear. The time of the race, three minutes, sixteen and nine-tenths seconds, had been equalled only once in the history of track and field. Coach Bresnahan and his team were acclaimed by sport followers far and wide, for to develop four such quarter mile runners in one institution was a feat to be marvelled at.

Scarcely had Wilson broken the tape after his final lap of the record-breaking relay, when a youthful fan, full of admiration and enthusiasm, ran out on the track and offered him a reward. "Mister, you sure done noble", he blurted out worshipfully, "here's a prize for you" — and proffered a nearly full sack of pop corn to the panting Iowa runner.

An analysis of the team's time made in the record race at Drake disclosed that Morrow ran

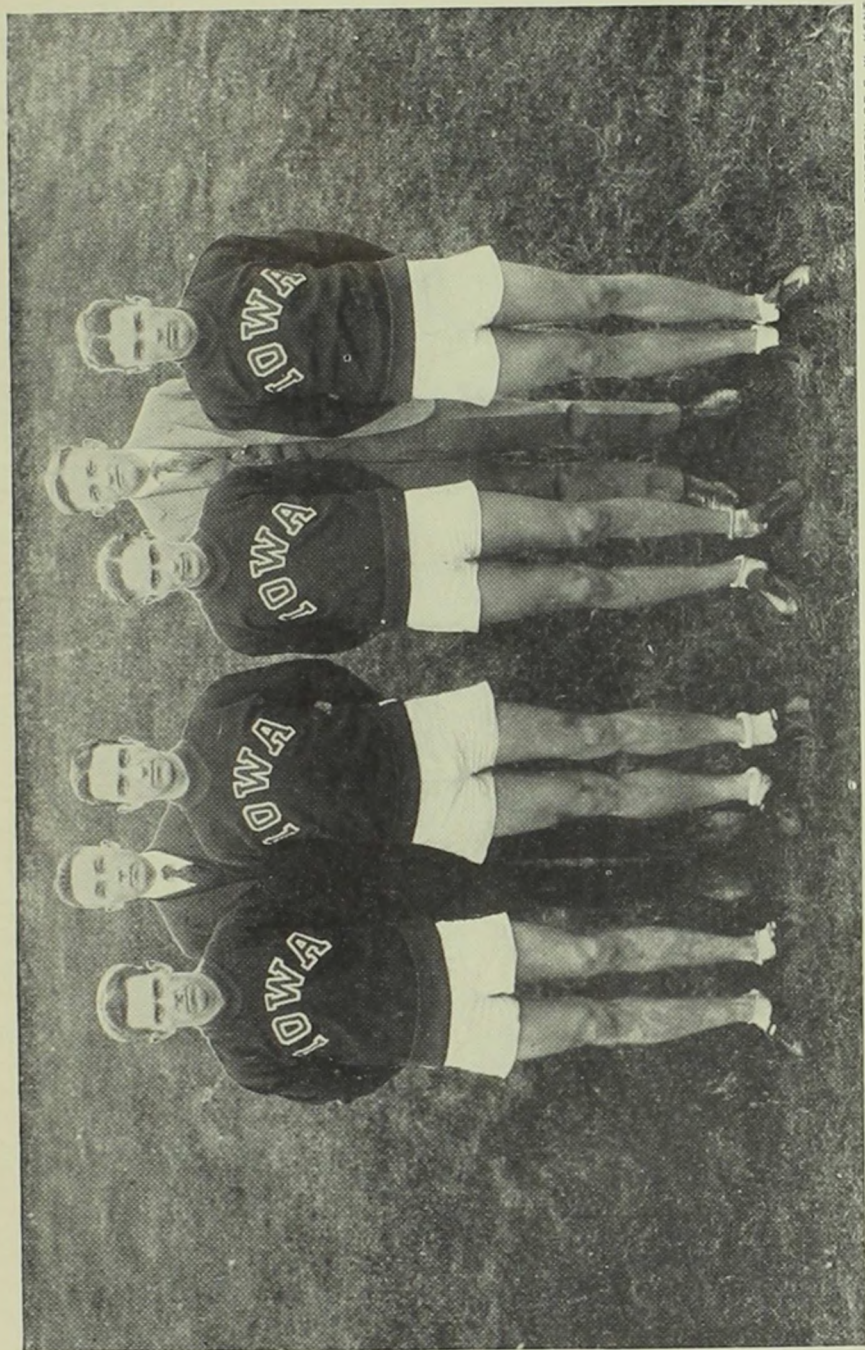


his quarter in 49.8 seconds, Noll in 49.8, Brookins in 49.3, and Wilson in 48 flat. All of the men except Morrow, who ran first, were timed from a running start.

During the next few weeks the members of the team forsook the mile relay and concentrated on their individual events in preparation for the outdoor dual season. Meets were scheduled with Northwestern and Chicago but the mile relay did not appear on the program.

The Thirty-first Annual State Track and Field Meet on May 18th and 19th at Iowa Field offered little competition for the Iowa mile relay team. The first day of the meet was dark and murky, but since "admission was free" several thousand spectators were in the stands. "The wind was blowing twenty miles an hour picking straw hats off the heads of bald officials, whirling powder puffs, remnants of the women's track meet last Thursday, around in miniature tornadoes, and blanketing runners in a wall that sapped their strength and lowered their speed." On Saturday the Iowa band played and entertained the crowd of two thousand onlookers, made up mainly of "men with here and there a sprinkling of brightly dressed girls." Coach Bresnahan, electing to save Brookins and Wilson for the hurdles, sprints, and broad jump, sent





COURTESY OF F. W. KENT

H. O. MORROW	G. T. BRESNAHAN	W. FIESELER	E. C. WILSON
	G. B. NOLL	C. R. BROOKINS	

THE 1923 MILE RELAY TEAM



Crawford and Coulter into the mile relay. With only two regular members, Morrow and Noll, the team won handily in the good time of three minutes, twenty-eight and two-tenths seconds.

And now Iowans awaited the Western Conference Meet at Ann Arbor on June 1st and 2nd with confidence. Although the Iowa track team had little hope of winning the meet, a record breaking performance was expected of the relay team. In the last race of their intercollegiate careers, one supreme effort, one grand finale might be anticipated.

"The meet opened in true Olympic style. Athletes, coaches and officials marched around the field behind the Michigan band and then came to attention in front of the flag pole as the band played the Star Spangled Banner." As the events progressed, it was evident that Iowa followers were doomed to disappointment. Coach Bresnahan chose not to concentrate his men on the relay. When the time came for the final event, Brookins had just set a world record in the low hurdles. Wilson, during the course of the afternoon, had competed in four other races. Noll had failed to place in the quarter mile. Coulter, running in place of Morrow, who had won second place in the half mile, was the only fresh Iowa man. As a result Iowa was relegated



to second place in the mile relay. If the Iowa men, all in prime physical condition, had been saved for that final race, and, running against a strong competitor in ideal weather, they might have earned a classic victory. But team strength must always be considered above individual performance, and undoubtedly Coach Bresnahan's decision resulted in more points for the Hawkeye squad than would otherwise have been possible. Iowa placed fourth in the meet.

With the school year ended there came several attempts to shatter the world's record for the mile relay. The first such attempt, at Lincoln, Nebraska, on June 30th ended in failure, for the Saturday morning rains rendered the track unfit for use. A few days later, however, it was announced that the Hawkeyes would make another trial on the Roosevelt stadium track at Mason City, which Coach Bresnahan said was "even faster than the Drake track." On August 17th, the greatest crowd that had ever packed the stadium turned out to watch the famous Iowans. The stands overflowed and the spectators were forced to occupy positions on and along the track, greatly hindering the competitors.

The teams took their positions at the starting line. The gun sounded and the starters were off in a manner which could have been developed



only through constant training. Morrow, obviously not in the best of condition, lost ten yards to his Chicago Athletic Association opponent, and Noll, running second for Iowa, lost five more. Brookins, taking the baton with a fifteen yard handicap, ran the greatest race of his relay career, cutting the lead of the Chicago team to a few scant yards. But the final lap proved to be the most thrilling of all. Wilson took the baton behind "Whitey" Hagen, former Northwestern star, and gradually gained as the two flying runners rounded the oval. When the final curve was reached Wilson cut loose with all his reserve strength and sped past Hagen into the final straightaway. Six thousand Iowa fans roared their approval as the speedy Iowa captain broke the tape five yards ahead of his blond Northwestern rival. The time of the race, three minutes, twenty and four-tenths seconds, was very good considering the short period that the team had trained.

Two matches remained on the summer's schedule, and the team returned to Iowa City to engage in two weeks of intensive drill. At the National A. A. U. championship meet held at Stagg Field on September 1st, the Iowa runners seemed primed for a supreme attempt to break the world's record for the mile relay. On this occasion Jupi-



ter Pluvius frowned on their efforts. Toward the end of the afternoon a "shower broke over the field", and while the "crowd, a sensible one, came in out of the rain" the athletes continued to race. The "end of the program was finished in a drizzle."

In spite of the elements the Hawkeyes again emerged victorious. The team had drawn the third lane, but Morrow broke through for the lead as was his custom. Noll then ran the fastest race of his career and gave Brookins a five yard lead. The final time of the race was three minutes, eighteen and one-tenth seconds — a new A. A. U. record.

On the following Saturday the fast travelling Hawkeyes were in New York City, scheduled to run against a picked team of eastern stars. Captain Wilson wrote to the Athletic Department that they were in excellent physical condition and enjoying their trip. "The Iowa men are being well taken care of," he said. "A landaulet and a chauffeur has been placed at their disposal and Thursday they will be given a sight-seeing tour".

The day of the meet! On the Yankee Stadium track the Iowa runners appeared nattily attired in clean new uniforms — in distinct contrast to other competitors. One man wore a uniform which had not been laundered for two years, and



the others were nearly as dirty. The liniment, sawdust, and cinders collected in past meets was supposed to be a talisman of good luck, a superstition which they would not endanger by washing their suits. "What do you think this is", one Easterner asked the Iowa team, "a dress parade?"

Rain fell during the early part of the meet, and pools of water formed on the track so that it looked like "Manhattan beach at low tide". By six o'clock, when the teams took their places for the start of the mile relay, most of the spectators were yearning "for the feel of a subway strap." From the time of the starting signal the East seemed destined to win, and the Hawkeye runners were gradually outdistanced. Wilson, running the final lap for the Iowans, crossed the finish line nearly six yards back of Driscoll, the eastern anchor man. The time of the eastern team, three minutes, twenty-one and four-fifths seconds, was exceptionally fast considering the track, as the turns were treacherous and the last thirty yards completely submerged. That night the Iowa team viewed "a different type of speed" in Flo Ziegfeld's Follies.

In the following spring of 1924, Coach Bresnahan arranged a return match with the picked team of eastern stars. Although the members of the Iowa team were not all eligible for varsity compe-



tition, they were in Iowa City and glad to train for another race. The event was scheduled as an "extra added attraction" of the Dad's Day program on May 3rd. A crowd of nearly four thousand spectators turned out to see the final race of the 1923 champions.

During the first three laps of the relay, Iowa's hopes alternately rose and fell. Every quarter was a race royal in itself. When the gun sounded for the final lap, Wilson took the baton three yards behind his rival. Then came "perhaps the greatest quarter mile ever seen on Iowa Field." For over two hundred yards Wilson failed to gain on the speeding Driscoll of Boston. At the four hundred yard mark he had reduced the lead to two yards, and as the men rounded the turn to the final straightaway he was only a yard behind. The two flying runners sprinted the last forty yards as they had never sprinted before. Inch by inch Wilson overtook the fast-stepping Driscoll. All the Iowa captain needed was a little more distance — only a few more yards and the race would be won. But Driscoll was determined too, and he maintained his lead of a scant few inches. The time, three minutes, seventeen and two-tenths seconds, came dangerously close to the record established the preceding spring at Des Moines.



In their last attempt, the Iowa team had gone down to defeat, but they had gone down gloriously. And, even in defeat, they still retained their well-earned title — the best mile relay team ever produced by any college or university.

FRANCIS O. WILCOX