

The People's Track

Run a lap or five with the regulars at **Kezar Stadium**, the public heart of San Francisco's running scene

By Rachel Swaby

photographs by Ian Allen

GEOGRAPHICALLY, Kezar Stadium is pretty darn close to the center of San Francisco. The city is roughly seven miles by seven miles, and the stadium is just a smidge northwest of center, a five-acre tract of land on the edge of Golden Gate Park and adjacent to the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood. For the local running community, however, the old stadium is the city's heart. If you're a runner in San Francisco, eventually you'll come through its gates to run on its historic track.

In fact, runners have been coming for nearly 90 years. In 1922, Mary Kezar (pronounced Key-zar), a descendant of California pioneers, willed the city \$100,000 to build a memorial in Golden Gate Park to honor her relatives. The city built a 22,000-seat stadium as a memorial—a venue on a triangular patch of land for city events and high school sports like football and track. To fit the space, architect Willis Polk, who designed more than 100 buildings in the Bay Area, gave the oval concrete bowl an atypical east-west orientation (the setting sun has always been a problem for athletes rushing west) and added a signature flourish with a large, arched entrance on the west side. The six-lane track was 440 yards long and made of crushed granite; before each meet, workers watered it down, pressed the granite with a heavy roller, then chalked the lines that marked the lanes.

Kezar opened in the spring of 1925 with a duel between the two greatest distance runners of the era, Paavo Nurmi and Ville Ritola. Between them, the Finnish runners had won nine gold medals on the track at the Paris Olympics the previous year. When they toed the starting line at Kezar that May, nearly 22,000 spectators watched them duke it out over two miles on the freshly laid track. (Nurmi won.)

In 1932, the stadium—since expanded to seat 60,000 spectators—hosted the fifth British Empire–United States championship track-and-field meet. Brisk winds blew that August day, and

