

the drafty stadium was a surprise to some of its guests. "I won my race and set a new record with the wind," U.S. hurdler Simone Schaller Kirin told an interviewer. "Naturally, that didn't count." Still, the home team won the meet—six points to four.

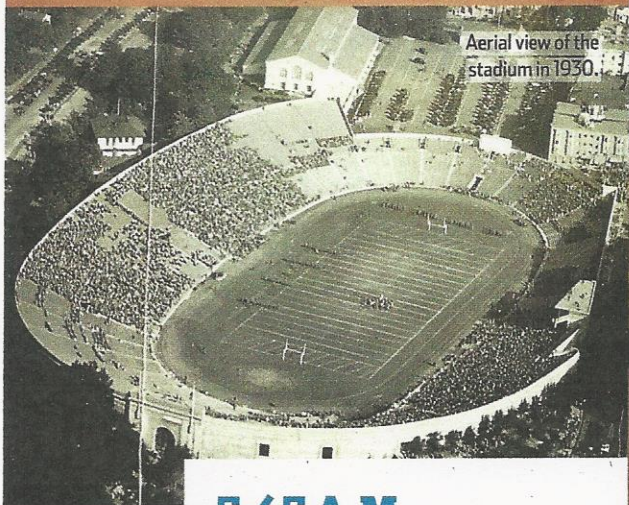
Football arrived in 1946, when the San Francisco 49ers moved in. For more than two decades, their fans—despite nearly nonexistent parking and a mere 16 inches of seat space per spectator—were intensely loyal to the home field: Hunter S. Thompson wrote, "I sat through hailstorms on the wet planks of Kezar Stadium when [49ers quarterback] John Brodie was getting sacked [and] stomped like a bird every Sunday." Regular attendees remember the smell of cigar smoke lingering over the place and how the stadium's design amplified the sound of the hits. But the coaches and the media thought the field was too soggy and the conditions too cramped, so in 1971, the team departed for Candlestick Park. After the last game at Kezar, fans ripped up the bleachers for souvenirs. "They're Leaving Kezar to Kids and Seagulls," read one local newspaper headline.

Kezar's football heyday coincided with heavy use by local runners. Public school kids learned to sprint in the shadow of 60,000 empty seats, and tested their efforts against rival teams. Local coaches remember the stadium's unique 220-yard dash—a straightaway that began outside the stadium. When the starting gun fired, teenagers launched through a tunnel that ran under the bleachers before emerging onto the oval toward the finish. When not reserved for the kids, Kezar attracted track-and-field events for both amateur athletes and professional runners.

Its luster as an athletic venue dimmed in the 1970s, though Kezar still had a few more moments left in the spotlight. In 1971, Clint Eastwood shot the stadium's fictional groundskeeper—the Scorpio Killer—on the 50-yard line in *Dirty Harry*. The Grateful Dead, Led Zeppelin, Santana, and Bob Dylan all performed to packed houses there in the '70s.

But by 1989, the stadium was crumbling and underused for its size, so the city razed it. Workers knocked out the steep bowl of bleacher seats and replaced them with stacks of wooden benches that lined the track's straightaways and could seat 10,000. They opened up the east and west sides as entrances, and added a .4-mile paved loop above the bleachers to give people another place to walk or run. They added the pink and beige freestanding arch at the west entrance, and stand-alone columns at the east entrance as an homage to Willis Polk's architectural style. In the middle of it all, the city laid a state-of-the-art, eight-lane Mondo track (named for its Italian manufacturer). "Little Kezar" became a rare resource: a free facility open daily for all (previously, users were limited to school groups and athletes in sanctioned meets).

Now, 23 years later, the track needs a facelift. Its lanes are buckled and stained, and the surface—worn down to its base layer—has long lost its spring. While the runners have dealt with the hard, uneven, patchy lanes, they've been vocal about the oval's importance. The ritual of returning to Kezar week after week strengthens their bodies, their minds, and their friendships. Their advocacy—as part of the Kezar Advisory Committee—worked: The city will soon begin replacing the track. And so another transformation is coming for Kezar, one that will shut it down for three to four months. But until then, it's just another Tuesday at the track.



Aerial view of the stadium in 1930.

5:45 A.M.

James Cook, 45, founder/head coach of O2Athletics Bootcamp, Oakland, CA (top right, wearing yellow shirt in front row). Kezar regular for 14 years; runner since 1991. Here to train boot-campers:

"I used to be a professional Muay Thai kickboxer and [a mixed martial arts] fighter. I would run past Kezar in the morning at 5:15, but it was never open. Finally, I decided to climb the west side gate and work out. I did that for so many years. Kezar is my secret weapon. It extended my fighting career five years. In late 2006, other fighters were saying, 'Wow, you're really well conditioned.' I invited them to come train with me here. That kind of morphed into teaching civilians the combat sports conditioning I do now."

