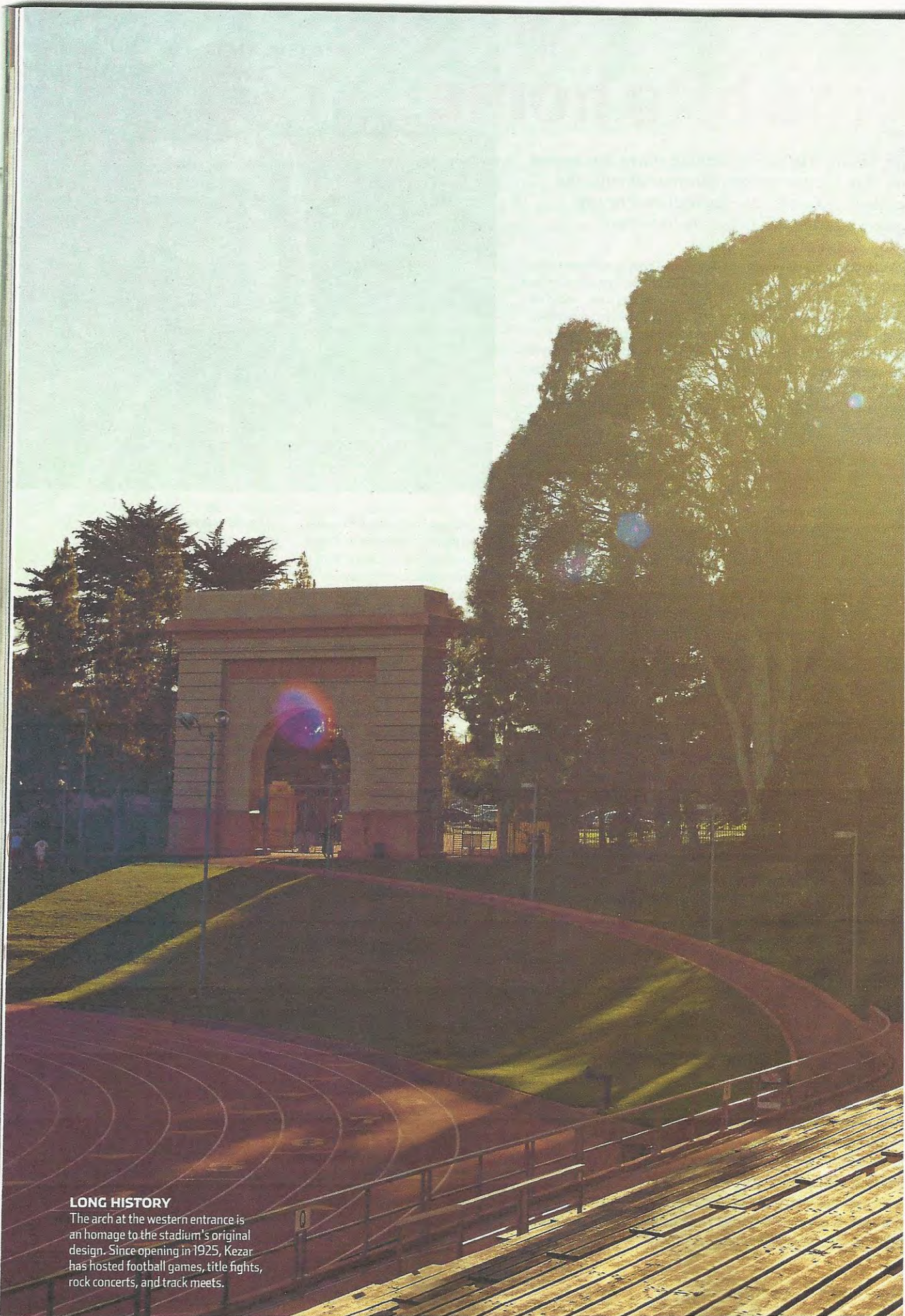




LONG HISTORY

The arch at the western entrance is an homage to the stadium's original design. Since opening in 1925, Kezar has hosted football games, title fights, rock concerts, and track meets.

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



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.

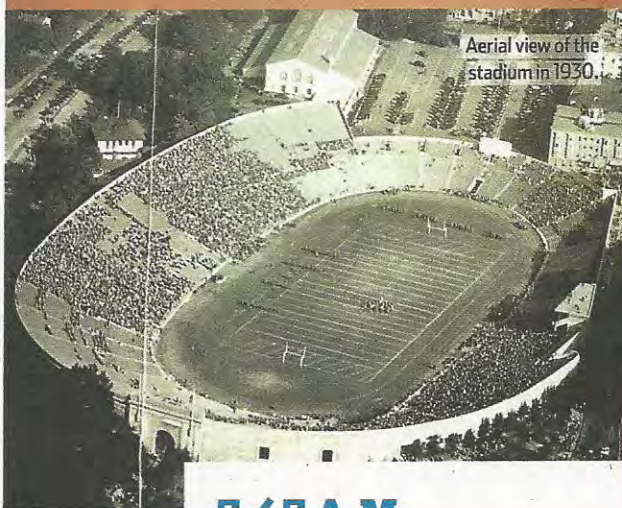
Football arrived in 1946, when the San Francisco 49ers moved in. For more than two decades, their fans—despite nearly nonexistent parking and a mere 16 inches of seat space per spectator—were intensely loyal to the home field: Hunter S. Thompson wrote, "I sat through hailstorms on the wet planks of Kezar 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.



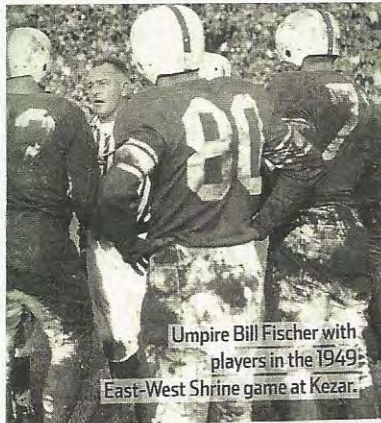
Aerial view of the stadium in 1930.

5:45 A.M.

James Cook, 45, founder/head coach of 02Athletics 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."





Umpire Bill Fischer with players in the 1949 East-West Shrine game at Kezar.



A Lincoln High student vaults 10 feet 10 inches to finish third in a city high school meet in 1947.



ical turnout for a 18 football game.



4:15 P.M.

Robert McDaniels, 56, coach/founder of MacCanDo Tenderloin Youth Track Club (which teaches at-risk youth ages 5 to 12 to run), Vallejo, CA (wearing purple shirt above and below). Kezar regular for 25 years; runner for more than 35. Here—with wife, Yuko—to teach the kids:

"I came from domestic violence. My dream was to have a track club so no kid would experience what I experienced. We teach them, 'No guns, no drugs, and *no* means *no*.' If anything is going on, they should talk to me about it. I tell the kids, 'If you have a heart, you can be a runner. It's really hard to come out of the darkness, but the only way to achieve something is to try.' Parents get out there and run, too. To feel a part of a family environment like this—I never had that as a kid. We only had school and the projects. MacCanDo is the baby of Kezar. All the other clubs on the track know Mac kids. When the kids run, everybody has something beautiful to say to them."

