

## Jerry Byrd: Track performances have improved quite a bit in the last 50 years

Written by Jerry Byrd

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In the 800-meter relay, a time of 1:28.0 means an average of 22 seconds flat for each 200-meter leg.

That was a state record in 1968, when McKinley (Baton Rouge) became the first Louisiana high school to break 1:28.0 with a 1:27.6 in the 880-yard relay, a slightly longer distance.

McKinley proved it was no fluke by equaling its 1:27.6 record in 1969. That was also in the 880-yard relay.

After the Louisiana High School Athletic Association switched to metric distances in 1980, Istrouma (Baton Rouge) lowered the state record in the 800-meter relay to 1:24.97 in 1999.

That's an average of slightly less than 21.3 for each 200-meter leg. As far as I know, that performance (in the Class 5A state meet) is still the state record.

Jesuit (New Orleans) set the state record for Louisiana High School Athletic Association schools in 1952 with 1:31.2. Istrouma lowered it to 1:30.9 in 1955 and Oakdale was the first LHSAA school to break 1:30 with 1:29.7 in 1960. Shreveport's Byrd High lowered the record to 1:28.6 in 1965.

All of that happened before the integration of Louisiana schools, meaning those were all-white relay teams.

A few more performances in running events during that era are still impressive. Byrd's Owen Self lowered the state record in the mile run (which is now the 1,600-meter run) to 4:11.8 in 1967. That is no longer the state record, but it's still fast enough for first place in most state meets.

Before Self came along, the state record for all classes was 4:22.9 by Paul Arsugua of East Jefferson in 1965. Self, who was later a collegiate standout at the University of Tennessee, shattered that record by more than 11 seconds.

High school athletes were running on cinder tracks at that time. Their times would be several seconds faster with the all-weather tracks now available.

The improvement is even more marked in the 1,600-meter relay, which was the mile relay before the switch to metric distances.

When it was the mile relay, Byrd was the first LHSAA school to run 3:20.0 (an average of 50 seconds per 440-yard leg) in 1959, and lowered its own state record to 3:18.3 in 1965.

Scotlandville (Baton Rouge) lowered the record to 3:18.1 in 1970 and Fair Park lowered the record to 3:16.8 in 1972. The Lake Charles High quartet of Jason Charles, Ronnie Hayes, Clarence Gray and Efreem Davis broke that record with 3:13.7 in the 1978 Class 4A state meet. I don't recall anybody breaking that record.

In the last two years that it was the mile relay (1979 and 1980), Fair Park teams that included Rod Richardson had the fastest times in the state both years. Richardson is best remembered for setting state and national records in the 100-meter dash with 10.20 seconds, but he also ran the 400 in 47.8 seconds — which was (and still is) a very impressive performance.

When Richardson ran the 47.8, the state record was 47.4 seconds by Andrew Brown of Opelousas. Desmond Johnson of St. Augustine (New Orleans) lowered the state record to 45.99 in 1995, when he won the Class 5A state championship for the third year in a row.

When Byrd teams coached by the late Woodrow Turner were dominating Louisiana high school track and field in the 1950s and 1960s, the Yellow Jackets were state champs in the 440 yard dash five times in a span of 12 years (from 1957 to 1966) — and Byrd won the mile relay 11 times in a stretch of 15 years. Everybody else was competing for second place in those days

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