

# How Track Paid Off Big For John Morrison

By GEORGE MASKIN  
Sports Editor

The big name in Michigan high school track this spring has been John Morrison of Redford Union.

But if it weren't for what transpired on a Saturday afternoon two years ago, Morrison may never have emerged as "Mr. Big."

On that day in 1967, Morrison was 15 years old and a sophomore at Redford Union. He was a member of the Redford Union track varsity, but he wasn't making any headlines.

In most of the races he ran he came in second or third or maybe even fourth.

He didn't even qualify to represent his school in the Suburban Six League championship meet.

THEN CAME THAT Saturday afternoon in mid-May. Morrison and his teammates entered the state Class A regionals. Morrison, the youngster who had done little most of the season, won his way to the state championships the following Saturday at Michigan State in East Lansing.

Little did he dream that two years later he would come back to Michigan State as "Mr. Big" and with a scholarship in his pocket to run for the Spartans as soon as he finishes his high school career at Redford Union.

What did qualifying for the state meet do for Morrison?

"It changed him from just a so-so prep athlete to one who was to become great," says his coach, John MacKenzie.



JOHN GETS a congratulatory hug from pretty Donna Heseltine after a big victory.



STEAK PROVIDES the protein a young track star needs, says John's mother, Mrs. Diana Morrison.

"Until John qualified for the state meet, he didn't take his track very seriously. He'd fool around a little in practice. He didn't realize just how important it was to work and work and work some more."

"From that day on, we found we were dealing with a different John Morrison. His entire attitude changed about track and about other things."

"He figured that since he had a chance at East Lansing to compete with the state's best, why not step out and become a standout himself."

MacKenzie continued:

"When he came back to school as a junior, he was more receptive to track. He could see for himself that if he could accomplish anything in track, it would pay off handsomely for him. And pay off it has."

THE "PAYOFFS" are many, as John well realizes as he reflects back on his last two years of prep competition. For example:

1. As a senior he won all the big meets in the high hurdles—the league, the regional, the state, the Mansfield, Spartans and Schafer relays; he was unbeaten in the lows until the very last step in last Saturday's state meet at East Lansing.

2. He has turned in the fastest times by a schoolboy in the hurdles in Michigan and the nation this season.

3. He has been invited to participate in a national meet in California.

4. He could choose any college he wanted—and he picked Michigan State.

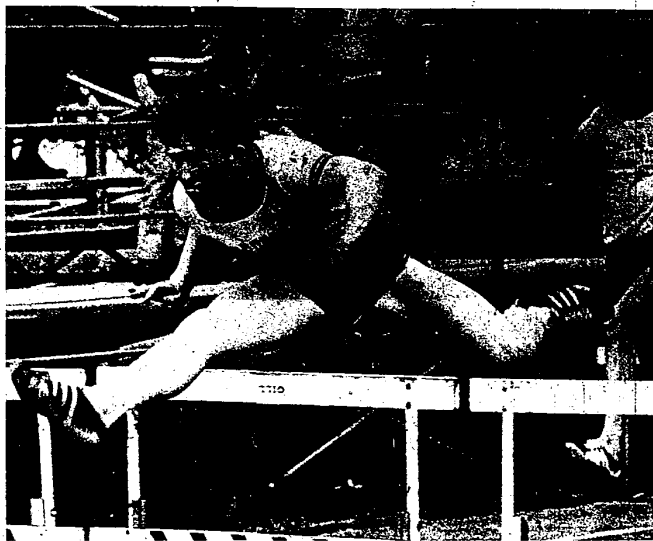
THERE'S A STRANGE twist about Morrison. He wasn't always a hurdler.

When he went out for track at Redford Township's Pearson junior high as a ninth grader, Morrison wanted to be a sprinter.

Pearson's Coach Maurice Close looked over Morrison.

"I had a lot of kids who could sprint, but nobody for the hurdles," Close recalls.

"He was tall and long-legged. I figured that maybe he'd be a good one to try and run over the hurdles. So we changed him over."



RE'S JOHN MORRISON shows the furling form that brought him national fame. (Observer photos)

Thus began the Morrison-hurdling story.

He ran only the highs at Pearson. When he switched to Redford Union, MacKenzie figured that he could use Morrison in the low sticks and also in the high jump.

As time passed at Redford Union and Morrison found himself developing as a hurdler, he devoted more and more time to the support.

"I'd say another important lift for John was when he would beat Dennis Fifield regularly during his junior year," MacKenzie added. "Fifield was considered a first-rate hurdler on his own, and it meant a great deal to Morrison when he could beat a runner with Fifield's ability to the finish line."

MacKENZIE DECLARES that Morrison is one of the most knowledgeable trackmen he has ever coached.

"He studies the other events, like the distances and the field events," the coach added. "In this way, he has been a terrific inspiration to his teammates and made a great captain for us this past season."

"Morrison like the rest of our boys felt last winter that this might be their year to win it all—the league, the state, the various major relays."

"To achieve their goal they'd go all out."

"Many mornings, they'd run four and five miles before going to school to get in their quantity work. Then in the afternoon, after school, they'd get in their quality work when they'd be tired, etc."

"These kids weren't selfish... and the least selfish of all was Morrison, despite all the fame and all the glory that came his way and all the pressure situations he encountered."

HOW DOES MacKENZIE rate Morrison with the state's other great schoolboy hurdlers of the past—Rex Cagley from Farmington, John Tipton of Pontiac Central and Hayes Jones of Pontiac Central—each of whom has gone on to international fame?

"It's tough to compare one against the other," MacKenzie said. "But this much I'm sure of: Cagley, Tipton and Jones all were

super-stars. And now John Morrison has proved with his times and performances, he's one, too."

As for Morrison, his biggest praise is for coach MacKenzie.

"He helped me tremendously in many ways, but what he did for all of us on the team was to get us great meets this year... like the Mansfield relays. We went against the best competition possible and that's important," Morrison declared.

That John has turned out to be a stellar trackman probably doesn't surprise those in his family.

His grandfather was a great sprinter... who ran and beat the famed Paavo Nurmi and later starred at Assumption College in Windsor.

John's dad, also John, participated in the pole vault at Pershing High. But the senior John never was a standout.

But Morrison's mother and dad and two sisters, Cathy and Suzie, are always there to cheer John. Cathy is now at Pearson Junior High. Suzie is in grade school.

All of which means to the lament of coach MacKenzie: He's seen the last of the Morrison clan for track... unless, someday John has a son and he grows up as a trackman at Redford Union.



TRACK PRINCIPALS at Redford Union are (from left) Co-Captain Jim Lagana, Coaches Charles Paterson and John MacKenzie, Co-Captain John Morrison.

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