

Sports & the State Fairgrounds

By Danielle Kauffmann, Director of Engagement
Indiana DNR Division of Historic Preservation & Archaeology

Sports and competitions have been intertwined with the Indiana State Fair since its formation in 1852. As agricultural products were the primary commodity within the state in the nineteenth century, the state fair enabled farmers to meet, exchange ideas, learn new farming techniques, and highlight products. Plow contests, horse pulls, and harness racing were some of the first competitions to occur at the fair. When the Indiana State Fairgrounds moved to its current site at the northwest corner of East 38th Street and Fall Creek Parkway in 1892, the fairgrounds included a one-mile racetrack and a 6,000-seat grandstand.

Since then, sports and competitions have evolved and expanded at the Indiana State Fairgrounds, not just during the annual state fair, but throughout the year. Here is a brief look at some of those sporting events:

Harness (Sulky) Racing

A common horse race at the fairgrounds track, harness racing, involves Standardbred horses pulling a light, two-wheeled vehicle also called a sulky. Sulky racing horses can either be pacers, in which the horses move both legs on one side of its body at the same time, or trotters, in which the horses stride its left front and right rear legs together and right front and left rear together.

The one-mile track located on the fairgrounds has essentially stayed in its original location since its construction in 1892. Prior to its construction, Speed Superintendent Hiram B. Howland declared “We will have a track that shall be a credit to the new order of things, and it must be the best in the world.” Ten years later, a ½-mile track was built inside the bigger oval. The first horse to win a race at the fair on the mile track was Walter McKlyo, bred by Walter McCord. Some early horse racing greats, such as Dan Patch and Greyhound, raced at the Indiana State Fair. Greyhound finished a 1937 1-½-mile time trial in 3:02.30. In 1939, paired with the mare Rosalind in a tandem race, they broke the tandem record in a mile finishing in 1:58.15.



*“1928 birds-eye view looking at the Indiana State Fairgrounds.”
Indiana Historical Society, J. C. Allen and Son Collection, 1926-1952*



*“Horse racing at the Indiana State Fair,” 1932.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection*



*“Greyhound the horse racing at the Indiana State Fair,” 1935.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection*

The adjacent horse barns standing today were constructed using Works Progress Administration funds during the Franklin D. Roosevelt presidency. They were built to replace some of the older speed barns originally located there. Some of the innovations used in these speed barns were the usage of raised clerestory windows for better ventilation and light, along with concrete floors for better sanitation for the animals. During the state fair, some of these barns are open for public viewing and tours.

By the 1940s and 1950s, the purses for harness racing reached \$134,000 and the fair joined the Grand Circuit's Big Five series of races. Today, you can see sulky racing at the Indiana State Fairgrounds during the fair, as well as for events outside of fair season. In 2019, the mile-long oval track converted to a harness racing facility with an all-weather surface of crushed limestone. The infield now serves as parking during the Indiana State Fair.



Speed Barns at the Indiana State Fairgrounds.
Photo: Danielle Kauffmann



"Indiana State Fair grand circuit racing," 1932.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Library BroadSides Collection



"Indiana State Fair racing program, 1952."
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection

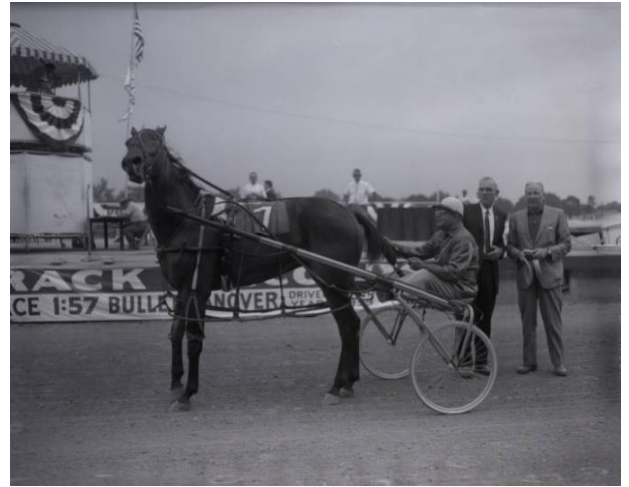


"Horse racing at the Indiana State Fair," 1946.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection

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"Race Track, State Fair Grounds, Indianapolis, Ind." Postcard.
Indiana Memory, Indianapolis Postcard Collection



"Harness Racing at the State Fair," 1963.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection



"Harness Racing at the State Fair," 1961.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection

Auto Racing

By the early twentieth century, the automobile craze opened new opportunities for competitions at the fairgrounds. Barney Oldfield became the first driver to reach 60 miles per hour on a closed course at the Fairgrounds on June 29, 1903, finishing the mile in one minute. In the frigid temperatures of November 1905, Charlie Merz and Jap Clemens set a record in a 24-hour race held at the fairgrounds. It is said that at this event, future founders of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, Carl Fisher, Arthur Newby, and Jim Allison discussed the idea of building a giant racetrack.

One of the premier automobile events held at the fairgrounds' oval track was the "Gold and Glory Sweepstakes," a race organized by and for the African American community. A group of black business leaders on Indiana Avenue formed the Colored Speedway Association and proposed a racing circuit across the country since they were barred from competing in most races. This circuit traveled to Chicago, Cleveland, and other cities around the Midwest, culminating in the 100-mile finale at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. The grand prize reached \$2,500 and was a large sum for any race purse at the time. The Gold and Glory Sweepstakes occurred here from 1924-1936 drawing 10,000 spectators. Charlie Wiggins, born in Evansville in 1897 before moving to Indianapolis in 1922, was a car mechanic who built and raced his own car, "The

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Wiggins Special". He earned the nickname "Speed King" for winning a total of three circuit titles in the 1930s. In the 1936 (and final) edition of the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes, Wiggins was injured in a multi-car wreck, lost a leg, and was never able to race again. He built himself a wooden leg, and for the remainder of his life, continued working on cars, training other mechanics, and pushing for inclusion in auto racing.



"Officials, Drivers, and Mechanics at the Gold and Glory Sweepstakes Race," September 20, 1936.
Indiana Historical Society, Indiana Recorder Collection



"Automobile racing at the Indiana State Fair," 1953. *Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection*



"Rodger Ward Racing At Indiana State Fairgrounds, 1962."
Indiana Memory, Indianapolis Motor Speedway Collection

Starting in the 1950s, the "Hoosier Hundred", a 100-mile dirt track race in midget automobiles, took center stage at the Indiana State Fair. Many notable names in racing history have participated in this event including A.J. Foyt, Mario Andretti, Al Unser Sr., and Rodger Ward. Concrete walls and guardrails were later added to the track to increase safety. When the fairgrounds converted the mile-long oval track to an all-weather surface of crushed limestone in 2019, the Hoosier Hundred at the Indiana State Fairgrounds came to an end after more than 65 years.



"USAC 100-mile stock car race billboard," 1962.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection



“Hoosier 100 pace Lap, 1962.”

Indiana Memory, Indianapolis Motor Speedway Collection



“AJ Foyt On Track At Indiana State Fairgrounds, 1962.”

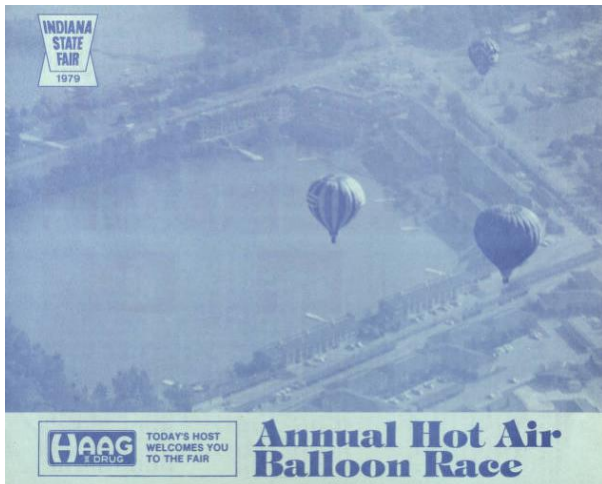
Indiana Memory, Indianapolis Motor Speedway Collection



“Lucky Tetter Troupe performing,” 1934. *Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection*



“Start of the tractor race at the State Fair,” 1933. *Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection*



“Annual Hot Air Balloon Race program, 1979.” *Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection*

Stunts / Bizarre / Fun

Some bizarre sporting events and stunt shows also occurred at the fairgrounds track. In the 1930s, Earl M. Teter, of Noblesville, Indiana established “Lucky Teter and his Hell Drivers” as a traveling attraction to state and county fairs. Lucky and his crew took the top prize at the 1933 Century of Progress World’s Fair where he proclaimed to be the “world’s greatest stunt driver.” In 1942, at a benefit event at the fairgrounds on July 4, 1942, his “Rocket Car” stunt involved a 150-foot leap in a Plymouth Roadster, but he lacked enough power and he fell a few feet short, crashing into the receiving ramp.

Automobiles weren’t the only mechanical races at the fairgrounds. In 1933, Barney Oldfield set another record at the fairgrounds, hitting 39 miles per hour at a tractor race.

Motorcycle racing first appeared at the dirt track at the fairgrounds in 1952. The program from that year’s fair advertised the races as covering 75 miles, culminating in a five-mile national championship race. In 1991 at the Indy Mile motorcycle race, Scott Parker won his fourth straight 25-lap race, becoming the winningest racer in dirt track history.

The Giant Hot Air Balloon Race began in 1975. The race is a “Hare” and “Hound” format, in which the “Hare” balloon will lead the way and determine the target area for the rest of the field. The “Hound” balloons chase the “Hare” and try to toss a bean bag with a streamer as close to the center of the target marked with an “X”. The inaugural race in 1975 was delayed twice due to weather, causing only five of the seventeen entries to lift off. Denise Weiderkehr, 17, of St. Paul, MN won by dropping a bag of Indiana corn within 146 feet of the “Hare” balloon’s mark. The balloon race is extremely weather dependent, and some years have been cancelled due to strong winds or inclement weather.



The Indiana Album: Ray Hintz Collection

“Indiana State Fair Coliseum, Indiana, Indiana, circa 1910.”
Indiana Memory, Indiana Album, Ray Hintz Collection

Moving inside, many sports and competitions have been held in the Indiana State Coliseum. The first coliseum was constructed in 1907 for \$100,000. It had 4,000 seats and a dirt floor as it served primarily for showing livestock. Public Works Administration funds made it possible for the fair board to construct a new, larger coliseum in 1939, under architect Merritt Harrison. The Art Deco structure features tan brick and Indiana limestone on the exterior. In 2012, the Coliseum underwent a \$53-million renovation in which the exterior envelope of the building was restored, while the entire interior was replaced and modernized, receiving code updates, accessibility improvements, and new seating. Like the track, the coliseum has been used for numerous events. It has served as a “Livestock Pavilion” where champion horses and cattle are judged and awarded, but also hosts a variety of sporting events throughout the year.

Ice Hockey

The c. 1939 coliseum originally served as a “Livestock Pavilion” and was the best and largest indoor performance venue in the state. Prior to the building’s construction Arthur Wirtz, a private donor from Chicago, donated \$200,000 to fund the necessary features needed to create an ice rink. Through his private Indianapolis Coliseum Corporation, he leased the building for numerous ice events, bringing the American Hockey League’s Indianapolis Capitals here from 1939-1952, a farm team for the Detroit Red Wings. The Indianapolis Capitals won the Calder Cup in 1942 and 1950, held in the coliseum.



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“Livestock Judging Contest in the Coliseum at the 1951 Indiana State Fair.”
Indiana Historical Society, J.C. Allen and Son Collection, 1926-1952.



“Scraping the ice rink,” c. 1938-1940.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds & Event Center Collection



“Crowd of Hockey Fans” Hockey game at the State Fairgrounds, no date.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds and Event Center Collection

Other hockey teams that played in the coliseum include the Indianapolis Chiefs of the International Hockey League (IHL) (1955-1962), the Indianapolis Checkers of the Central Hockey League and IHL (1979-1985), the Indianapolis Ice of the IHL (1988-1994 and 1997-1999) and of the United States Hockey League (2004-2012). Since 2014, the Indy Fuel call the coliseum home and are an ECHL team affiliated with the Chicago Blackhawks.

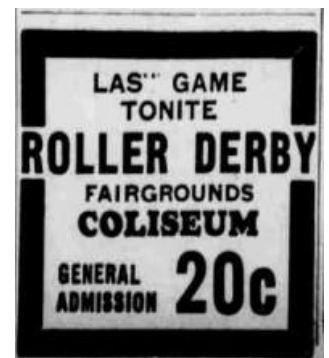


“Indianapolis Capitols team photo,” c. 1938-1940.
Indiana Memory, Indiana State Fairgrounds & Event Center Collection

Roller Derby

As roller derby emerged in the 1930s, the first event appeared at the Indiana State Fair Coliseum in the spring of 1937. At the Transcontinental Roller Derby (TRD), four Hoosiers participated in the competition – Tom Whitney of Indianapolis, Jane and Jack Cummings of Lafayette, and Gene Vizena of East Gary. By the second TRD, 5,000 fans attended on October 6, 1937. Reception of the event was mixed, as an *Indianapolis Star* reporter said “If you will bear with the roller derby reporter while he unravels his neck and focuses his eyes he will try to tell you about this dizzy occupation.”

Since then, roller derby events have periodically occurred at the fairgrounds. In 2006, the Naptown Roller Derby formed as part of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association and competed at the Coliseum. In 2008, attendance topped 4,500 with their highest attendance at 4,978 in 2011.



Left: “Jane and Jack Cummings of Lafayette form one of the fifteen teams entered in the Transcontinental Roller Derby which will start Thursday night at the state fairgrounds coliseum,” *Indianapolis Star*, April 13, 1937.

Above: “Advertisement of Roller Derby Event.” *Indianapolis Star*, May 4, 1941.

Basketball

As Indiana is well-known for Hoosier Hysteria stemming from high school basketball tournaments, it’s no surprise that basketball has been present at the Indiana State Fairgrounds. Basketball teams at the high school level, collegiate level, amateurs, and professionals have all played there over the years.

The Indiana High School Athletic Association held its “Final Four” at the original coliseum from 1921-1924 and in the current structure during World War II. At the first state championship in 1921, Franklin High School defeated Anderson

High School 35-22. In 1942, during the annual high school All-Star Game Series, the Indiana All-Stars defeated the Kentucky All-Stars 41-10.

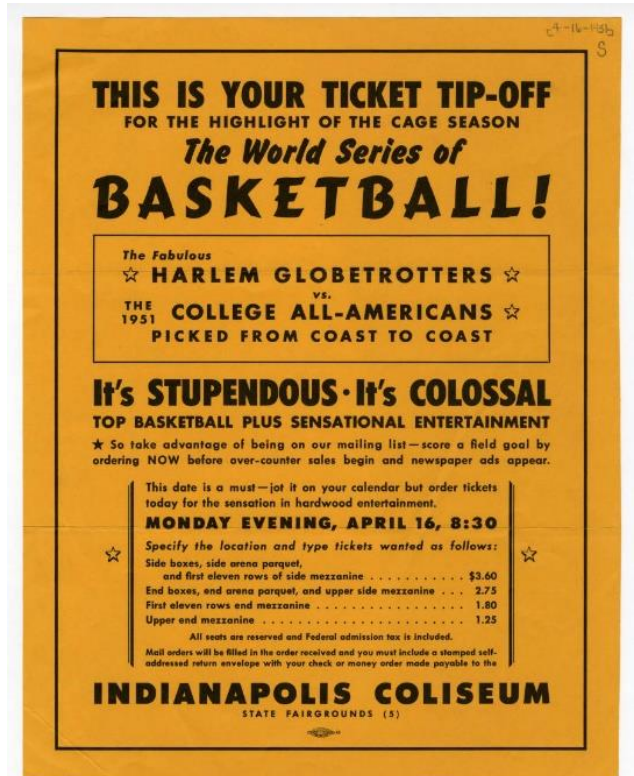
The world-famous Harlem Globetrotters also played at the Coliseum throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In 1951, 13,000 fans attended a single game that was played against the College All-Americans from around the country. An advertisement of the event stated that side boxes and rows closest to the court were \$3.60 while upper level and mezzanine level seats were \$1.25.

Prior to the construction of Market Square Arena in the early 1970s, the coliseum hosted the American Basketball Association's (ABA) Indiana Pacers from 1967-1974. Top ticket prices for a game in 1967 were \$4 with the cheapest seat at \$1.50. As the Pacers were in the ABA Finals in 1969, 1970, 1972, and 1973, the coliseum played partial host to the championship series. The Pacers won the ABA Championship in 1970, 1972, and 1973.

IUPUI created its men's NCAA basketball team in the early 1970s. The team adopted the nickname "Metros" showcasing its campus' location in downtown Indianapolis. The Metros played their home games at the coliseum until 1978. In their inaugural season in 1972, they finished with a record of one win and six losses. Today, the coliseum is once again home to the IUPUI (now Jaguars) of NCAA Division I and it hosts the Horizon League Conference Championships. When Indianapolis hosted the entire men's NCAA Division I March Madness tournament due to restrictions and bubble protocol as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the coliseum hosted first and second round games.

While Gainbridge Fieldhouse underwent renovations in 2021, the WNBA's Indiana Fever relocated their home games to the coliseum.

Join us at the **Indiana State Fair** this summer on one of our Trolley Tours where we will discuss the history of the fairgrounds and highlight historic buildings located at the fair!



"This is Your Ticket:" Flyer for basketball performances from the Harlem Globetrotters and the 1951 All-Americans at the Indianapolis Coliseum, Indiana State Fairgrounds on April 16, 1951. *Indiana Memory, Indiana State Library Broadsides Collection*



"Metro Men's Basketball 1976." College basketball games played at State Fair Coliseum *Indiana Memory, IUPUI Image Collection*