

Senator G.W. Fowler Trophy

by Katie Noonan

*"The high jump was his specialty. Zan was Maritime champion in that event several times. He was Canadian champion more than once. Not until most of his competitors had been eliminated did Zan Miller feel it necessary to remove the sweat pants which kept his springy legs warm."*¹

For a small town in one of Canada's smallest provinces, Sussex has produced an impressive number of athletes in a wide variety of sports: but none achieved the level of success in track and field, as did Andrew "Zan" Miller.

Zan's reputation alone was enough to attract the best competitors in track and field from around the Maritimes. As a result, Sussex became a track and field mecca with its own competitive grounds called "Fowler Field" - named after local politician and sports enthusiast, Senator G.W. Fowler.

G.W. Fowler was born in Hammond Vale, New Brunswick in 1858 and died in 1924 at the age of 66. Fowler accomplished a great deal in his relatively short lifetime – he was a lawyer, a Member of the Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick, a Member of Parliament and a Senator. Although he died nearly a century ago, Fowler was back in the news again in 2009 due to a completely unrelated, but fascinating war time story involving his daughter, Gladys.

During the First World War, Fowler, then a Member of Parliament, recruited troops for the 104th Battalion.² As commanding officer, he went

overseas with his men and broke up his troops in order to fill the ranks of other infantry units whose numbers had been significantly diminished. In 1917, Fowler and his wife Ethyl moved their two children – Eric and Gladys – to London, England where he was then stationed with the 13th Battalion of the Canadian Infantry.

In 1917, while volunteering as a nurse's aide in the army hospitals in London, Fowler's daughter Gladys experienced heart complications that led to her

untimely death at the age of 18. It was always assumed that Gladys was buried along with her parents as her name was inscribed on the tombstone in the family plot in Sussex. In 2009, however – 92 years later – an unmarked coffin with a connection to New Brunswick was discovered in the Kensal Green Cemetery in London.

It was soon discovered that the coffin held the body of Gladys Fowler. For reasons unknown, her body had never been sent to Hammond Vale for internment. The descendants of the Fowler

family arranged for Gladys' remains to be flown back to New Brunswick for a proper burial. The mystery of the unknown coffin was laid to rest on November 15th, 2009 when Gladys was finally buried next to her brother and parents.³

The year Gladys died, Fowler returned to Canada where he went on to represent Kings and Albert County in the Senate of Canada until his own death in 1924. He had always been concerned about youth, and perhaps, spurred on by his daughter's passing,



Senator G.W. Fowler Trophy (Height 17.2cm).
New Brunswick Sports Hall of Fame H.F.977.5-4

he decided to do something that would make a difference in their lives. Recognizing that Zan Miller was a positive role model for young people, he donated a piece of land to the town of Sussex to be used for track and field activities.⁴

On June 20, 1920, Fowler Field was officially opened with an invitational track meet. Senator Fowler donated trophies emblazoned with his name to the winners and, at a meet in July 1921, Zan won a number of these trophies - one of them being the award for the "Highest Team Aggregate", meaning the team with the highest total number of points combined from each of the events.

The comparatively small, silver loving-cup style trophy is in itself unremarkable: dents along the base indicate that it has been handled roughly in the years since it was awarded to Zan Miller in 1921. What makes the trophy important, however, is what it represents in terms of the important social and cultural role that sport – and specifically track and field - played in small town New Brunswick during the early part of the 20th century.

Born in Sussex in 1899, Zan Miller was a well-known athlete even before his track and field days. He participated in hockey and golf, winning the Interscholastic Hockey League titles in 1916 and 1917 and the Sussex Golf Club championships several times. He enlisted in the Canadian Overseas Expeditionary Force in April 1918 and served overseas with the Canadian Army 9th Siege Battery.

After the war, Zan continued to play hockey and was even part of the legendary Sussex senior men's team "The Old Grey Mare" (New Brunswick Sports

Hall of Fame Inductee) when they won the senior men's provincial title in 1921 and the Maritime championship title in 1922.

But it was Zan's success in track and field that won him accolades at the local, provincial, regional and national levels. He could do it all: from running high jump and broad jump to standing broad jump, hop step jump, pole vault, standing high jump, shot put, and hammer throw. He dominated every competition, taking first or second place in individual meets - and even when he was part of a team, he often racked up the majority of the team's points in just a single event.⁵



Zan Miller admires his many trophies and medals in a studio portrait taken at the height of his career, circa 1924. *New Brunswick Hall of Fame P.H.F. 76.4-1*

High jump was his specialty. Considering how difficult it was to do high jump during the first half of the century, it makes his accomplishments all the more impressive.

*"It is to be noted that the style requirement of that day for the high jump were extremely restrictive as compared to today. Feet had to precede the jumper over the bar, eliminating the successful roll and flop methods practiced by the champions of today. Another hazard which required a jumper to cushion his fall was the not-so-soft sawdust landing pits. Today jumpers land on elevated air cushions, permitting almost any type of landing without fear of injury."*⁶

It was not long before word of Zan's reputation spread through the Maritimes and fueled the competitive spirit of other participants. An article in the Kings County Record speaks of Dominion Day competitions in Sussex in the early 1920s:

*"... July 1 always was a big day in Sussex, for on that day the Sussex Amateur Athletic Club grounds – now O'Connell Park – were jammed with spectators to see the best track and field men in the Maritimes compete. Their prime objective was to beat Zan Miller in one of the events in which he competed, for more than once, the club championship came to Sussex on the strength of his abilities."*⁷

At the height of his career, Zan competed in Maritime and National championships, winning titles at both levels multiple times. His greatest achievement was in 1924 when he was selected to compete as part of the Canadian track and field team at the summer Olympics in Paris, France.

Success was bittersweet, however: before travelling to Paris, Zan's coach encouraged him to train for cross-country running events as he believed Zan was athletic and strong enough to have a fair shot at winning. However, Zan was not accustomed to this new style of training and his legs became sore and swollen.⁸

When it was time for Zan to compete in the high jump at Paris, his injuries put him at a severe disadvantage. In the words of J. Louis McKenna, a writer with the Kings County Record, Zan backed out *"at a height at which he would normally still be wearing his sweat pants."*⁹

Zan returned home injured and disappointed. No longer would he compete in the events he once dominated. So marked the end of his days as a track and field phenomenon. Zan's retirement from track and field also precipitated a rapid decline of the sport in Sussex and consequently, its importance in the social and cultural life of King's County:

*"With the decline of Zan Miller as a competitor, the SAAC grounds also went into decline. The July 1 track meets were no longer the great attraction they had been. The star who had attracted hundreds of people from many parts of New Brunswick and beyond had ceased to shine over the attractive field. It fell into disuse and disrepair."*¹⁰

Endnotes

1. J. Louis McKenna, "About This... And That", The Kings County Record. Sussex, New Brunswick. April 4, 1957. As found in Miller, "Zan" Andrew Nomination Folder. New Brunswick Sports Hall of Fame.
2. "George William Fowler", Canadian Orange Historical Site. Sourced April 6, 2014. <http://canadianorangehistoricalsite.com/GWFowler.php>
3. "Fowler's Niece To Be At Sunday Burial", CBC News website. Sourced April 4, 2014. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/fowler-s-niece-to-be-at-sunday-burial-1.848468>
4. Miller, "Zan" Andrew Nomination Folder.
5. Ibid.
6. "Legendary Sussex", The Kings County Record, n/d. As found in Miller, "Zan" Andrew Nomination Folder. New Brunswick Sports Hall of Fame.
7. "About This... And That", The Kings County Record. April 4, 1957.
8. "About This... And That".
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.



Zan Miller finishing a high jump. n/d. *New Brunswick Sports Hall of Fame P.H.F.76.4-2*



Track shoes worn by Zan Miller, one of New Brunswick's most successful track and field athletes. Zan Miller competed in the 7th Olympics at Paris, France in 1924. *New Brunswick Sports Hall of Fame H.F.977.5-6*