

After 70 years, leap still has legs

Coronado High track star inching closer to long-held mark

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If you walk outside the Coronado High School boys locker room, there, staring you in the face, affixed to a brick wall, is a list of the school's track and field records.

The one that catches your eye is the boys long jump.

*Ralph Mitchell . . . (at) Escondido High
. . . 23 feet, ¾ inch . . . 1938.*

Seventy years later, the record stands.

"I think that's crazy," says Mitchell, 87, a World War II veteran who still lives in Coronado.

But the record – set during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency – is in jeopardy.

Kyle Brown, a Coronado High senior who holds school records in the 100 meters and the triple jump, is longing to add the long jump to his collection.



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune
Coronado High School senior Kyle Brown practiced the long jump last week after meeting 87-year-old Ralph Mitchell, who still holds the school's long jump record.

“Yeah,” says Brown, who has jumped 22 feet, 10½ inches. “I want it.”

Says Lorton Mitchell, Ralph's son: “I think my father would like to see the record broken before he dies.”

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Ralph Mitchell stands at the front door of his J Street home and stares across the street at painted numbers on the curb. His vision impaired by glaucoma, Mitchell tests himself daily by trying to read the numbers 60 feet away.

“I have them memorized,” Mitchell admits, “but I don't cheat.”

Upon graduating from Coronado High in 1938, Mitchell earned a degree from the University of Virginia, then graduated as an ensign from the Navy's Officer Candidate School.

He worked in intelligence for two years during World War II, living in Havana, Cuba, spying on German U-boat communications and sending coded messages to U.S. ships. He got to know Ernest Hemingway, whose boat was docked next to Mitchell's.

After his four-year stint in the Navy, Mitchell worked for Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co., then was in charge of a car leasing program in National City.



Courtesy of Ralph Mitchell
A 1938 newspaper photo showed Ralph Mitchell's winning form as a Coronado High School track star.

Mitchell, the son of a Marine pilot who was raised for a time in Nicaragua and Guam, has spoken fluent Spanish since his youth. He was married twice, raised six children and has lived in Coronado since 1965.

“The old man's led a full life,” Mitchell says of himself. “The old man's led a good life.”

Since 1938, when Mitchell jumped 23 feet, $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch, an estimated 10,000 students have graduated from Coronado High.

And still, his record stands.

“What that says is that he was probably far ahead of his time,” says Rancho Bernardo High School track coach Don Jones, who has been coaching in the county since 1983. “To jump 23 feet in high school in 1938 is unbelievable.”

By comparison, Jesse Owens set the world record at 26 feet, 8½ inches in 1935, a mark that stood for 25 years.

Adds Jones: “Almost any year (Mitchell's record) would be a top-three jump (at the San Diego Section finals) and take you to the state meet. I didn't realize any (school) record had been held that long. Seventy years? You can't even comprehend it.”

Mitchell credits a rival athlete for helping him leap 23 feet.

“A nice Japanese student said, 'I'll tell you how you can jump farther,'” Mitchell recalls. “ 'You're such a fast runner, (but) don't try to run too fast. Run at pretty good speed and then when you get close to the take-off board, slow down. Gather yourself.' ”

“I wonder where that boy is today,” Mitchell says. “Hatada. I think his name was Hatada.”

Weeks later, Mitchell and his teammates climbed into cars for the long ride to Escondido. More than his long jump, Mitchell remembers what unfolded that afternoon in the 100-yard dash.

“I felt like I was shot out of a gun,” he says. “To this day, I can see myself going by all these nice young boys. I said, 'Where the hell is all this speed coming from?' ”

Mitchell felt so fast that he looked back, observed the trailing runners, allowed them to almost catch up, then pulled away.

“It was a wonderful feeling to beat them so badly,” he says wistfully.

Then came the long jump. He had regularly been jumping 21 feet. But after the pointer from the rival student, he hit 22 feet, then uncorked his 23-foot leap.

“We're almost 2 feet ahead of where we used to go,” Mitchell recalls thinking.



SCOTT LINNETT / Union-Tribune

Kyle Brown (left), a Coronado High senior who holds school records in the 100 meters and the triple jump, is longing to add the long jump to his collection. He wants to beat the record set by Ralph Mitchell (right) 70 years ago.

Mitchell would never jump 23 feet again and never competed in college. He had hoped to jump at the University of Virginia, but suffered serious head injuries in a car crash during his freshman year, flying through the windshield on his way home from a hunting trip.

“I was unconscious for three or four days,” he says. “My dad told me in later years he was really scared. He thought I was going to be a paraplegic. You go four days and don't wake up, they start worrying.”

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On a cool, breezy day last week in Coronado, Mitchell met Kyle Brown, the 18-year-old Coronado senior who wants to break his record.

Brown, wearing a Superman T-shirt with the sleeves cut off at the shoulders, demonstrated the utmost respect for Mitchell. The teenager hoisted a heavy bench and carried it to the long-jump pit where Mitchell had his picture taken.

Brown looked at a picture of Mitchell jumping during his high school days and approved of his form.

“It looks like he got real high,” Brown says. “Height is a key to jumping.”

Mitchell still walks, but haltingly. He often uses a walker. When Mitchell checked out the school's track records, Brown asked if he'd like a wheelchair, then darted to the track to retrieve one.

Mitchell hardly clings to the memory of his record. He says he didn't know it still existed until a reporter called.

“That record and 25 cents will buy you a small ice cream cone,” he jokes.

It's not even his proudest athletic feat. In his late 30s, he says he shot 73 two weeks in a row at a golf course in South Carolina.

“That's damn good,” he says.

You can respect your elders but still want to surpass them. Brown makes it clear he wants the long-jump record.

“If I don't get it tomorrow,” Brown said the day before 1st week's Central League finals, “I'll get it at the (San Diego Section) prelims. If I don't get it then . . . I don't even want to talk about not getting it.”

Brown placed second in the long jump at the league finals, jumping 22 feet, 7 inches. He'll try one more time Saturday at Mt. Carmel High School in the section preliminaries.

About Brown's quest to end his 70-year reign, Mitchell says, “I think that's wonderful. We need some fresh blood.”

Mitchell's thoughts are genuine. For a man who traded drinks with Hemingway, who matched wits with German U-boat captains, who lived in Nicaragua and Mexico City, who still plays piano at a local retirement home, seeing his name removed from the school's records will not bother him in the least.

Just the opposite. He's rooting for the kid with the Superman T-shirt.

“Of course,” says Mitchell. “Records are made to be broken.”