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World's fastest man deserves city tribute

Howard Drew is hardly a household name in the City of Homes, but he should be.

Drew, a record-shattering track star, 1912 Olympian and the first athlete to be known as "the fastest man in the world," began his

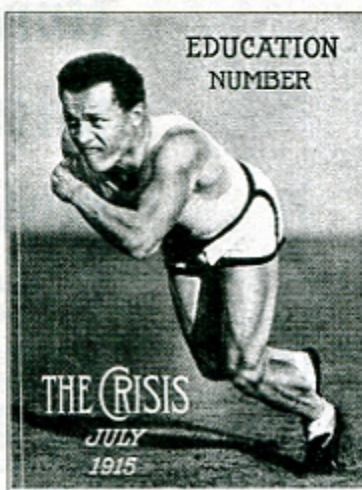
running career in Springfield.

The son of poor black parents who moved to Springfield to escape the Jim Crow South, Drew excelled in sports, but he was also a trailblazer in other aspects of his life — becoming an author, coach, soldier, lawyer and eventually a judge.

At the age of 15, Drew laced up a pair of makeshift running shoes, outfitted with roofing nails, to compete in the 1905 Fourth of July "Springfield City Games." He won the 100-yard dash handily, but doffed the uncomfortable pair of tennis shoes to run the next race, the 440-yard dash, in his bare feet. He took first place in that contest as well.

Only one of a few black students at Springfield High School, Drew dropped out his freshman year to help support his family working as a bellhop. He returned to high school a few years later, joined the track team, and gained the reputation as one of the nation's fastest sprinters. He ran a 10-second flat 100-yard dash winning him the notice of the head of the national Amateur Athletic Union Jack Sullivan, who helped propel him to the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm where Jim Thorpe was a teammate.

While Drew easily surpassed the fastest American on the Olympic team in the preliminary races at the Olympics, he pulled a muscle in the semi-finals of the 100-yard event and was forced to withdraw from the games. He was also set to run in the 1916 Olympics, but the games were canceled due to World War I.



Drew did, however, go on to the University of California where he tied or set every world record from 30 to 250 yards. At the same time, he was a straight-A student. He interrupted his college career to serve in World War I, receiving a Victory Medal and one defensive bar for his



service. Later he became a lawyer and moved to Hartford where he set up his law practice. He became the first black judge in Connecticut. He is buried in small, nondescript veterans cemetery in Windsor, Conn.

But there is no sort of monument to him in the city that gave him his athletic start. Thankfully there is a move afoot in Springfield to resurrect Drew's name — and his incredible story — to the place of honor it deserves.

Coach Larry Libow of Springfield, whose story about Drew appeared in last Sunday's Republican, is the prime mover in the effort to celebrate the storied athlete.

Mayor Domenic J. Sarno has agreed to form a committee to honor Drew. Its goals include: the installation of a Drew exhibit at the Springfield History Museum to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the 2011 Olympics; a banquet to honor Drew and other outstanding track-and-field athletes from Springfield; and the establishment of a fund for a statute of Drew to be placed at Forest Park, site of his first track meet.

We think the likeness of Drew that appears on this page would be a perfect model for a sculpture of the athlete. His life and achievements are the stuff that inspires new generations of athletes to strive for greatness.

We think it's time Drew's name earned the recognition it deserves in Springfield.