

“Corkey”

One Time Long-Distance World-Record Holder

By P. S. Marshall

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William “Corkey” Gentleman, was just one of many hardy athletes who entertained huge crowds at sporting venues worldwide by walking and running ultra long distances in pursuit of generous prize money and ornamental gold belts.

Born at Bethnal Green, London, in 1833, he was 5ft.4in in height and weighed 7st.6lb. He was known as “Corkey” because he *apparently* sold cat’s meat, which he delivered walking between twelve and fifteen miles daily. When he wasn’t working, William made money by running in one to ten-mile handicap races at local venues like Hackney Wick Grounds and the Prince of Wales Grounds, Bow, for cash prizes of up to £10 from 1862 to 1877.

In 1878 at the Agricultural Hall, Islington, Corkey competed in the 1st international version of the Astley Belt, a six-day “go-as-you-please” event around a tanbark track measuring 10-foot wide and seven laps to the mile. Putting in an indifferent performance to finish in sixth place (the winner, Daniel O’Leary of Chicago, scoring a new world record distance of 520 miles in the allotted time), Corkey went on to beat that with his own world record of 521 miles and 3 laps at the same venue later in the year in the “Long Distance Championship of England” race.

The illustration below shows Corkey, who had been 5/1 to win the race in a field of 23,



celebrating his victory over “Blower” Brown of Fulham. When asked how he felt after having hardly slept for six days, he simply replied, “A bit dazed like.” For winning, he received the staggering sum of £500 (about £30,000 in today’s money) and an ornamental gold belt.

After securing the world record, Corkey continued to earn a living as professional pedestrian competing in more ultra long-distance races predominantly at the “Aggie”. His last recorded race was in Sheffield, Yorkshire, in 1882.