



FRANK HART

Afro-American Sensation!

By P. S. Marshall

Author of “King of the Peds”

Very few people know about Frank Hart who became one of the most successful black athletes the sport has ever known.

Frank was born in Haiti and moved to the United States as a youngster. Little is known about his early life, but what has been established is that he moved to Boston,

Massachusetts, sometime in the 1870s, where he worked in a grocery store. Frank's real name was Fred Hichborn, but as an aspiring young professional athlete at the time, he changed his name because it had more appeal.

In 1879, the sporting world was gripped with what is known as the “*Pedestrian Mania*.” An athlete from Cambridge, England, called Charlie Rowell went over to the USA and managed to win \$50,000 in just two races. The sport of pedestrianism was extremely popular at the time and thousands of people would flock to the tracks worldwide to watch men walking and running round sawdust tracks for up to six long gruelling days and nights in pursuit of trophies and prize money beyond their wildest dreams. Frank knew he was good at foot racing and he wanted some of that money for himself!

He won his first race (a 30-hour, go-as-you-please event, which apparently he hadn't trained for) at the Boston Music Hall in April of 1879. During the event, which he had led since the sixth hour, a spectator tried to throw pepper in his eyes. It is more than likely that Frank was the only black boy in the race, and it is unclear whether he was attacked because of his colour, or because he was trying to be stopped from winning because substantial bets had been made on another competitor. Frank made 119 miles and 13 laps in 29 hours and received \$100 plus the “Englehardt Gold Medal” for winning the race.

His first attempt at a six-day go-as-you-please contest was in the “*big tent*” on the Back Bay, Boston in May of the same year. Frank came second and won \$150 with a score of 425 miles. After winning more placed prize money, he then won the O'Leary and Englehardt promoted 75 hours, 12½ hours per day, go-as-you-please contest, which was held at Providence, Rhode Island, in September. Frank made 362 miles in this one, winning the grand sum of \$300, a handsome gold chain, and a solid silver belt. The race,

which was watched by 20,000 people on the final night, attracted so much interest in surrounding cities that carrier pigeons were dispatched with messages about the latest scores. As the race reached its finale, all the remaining contestants on the course received several floral tributes each, with Hart's tent being "*literally strewn with flowers.*"

His performances attracted the attention of the famous "*ped*" (an affectionate name used at the time by the fans to refer to the professional pedestrians who competed in these events) and one time world-champion, Daniel O'Leary, who was looking for a protégé and who was said to have taken great interest in the lad. He taught Frank to imitate his gait and manner to perfection, even carrying the corn cobs that his mentor swore by. Due to the similarities in style Hart gained the nickname, "Black Dan".

"Gentlemen in sporting business sometimes keep their men back to make money and other things, but I don't want that," he told O'Leary. "I must go straight and win or I'll go back to groceries."

O'Leary entered his pupil in the six-day 5th international Astley Belt contest at Madison Square Garden, New York, where in front of huge crowds, which really took to him, Frank would make \$2,730.00 for finishing in fourth position.

The rising star was now capturing the attention of the newspapers, which were falling over themselves to write about the exciting young Afro-American whom big things were expected of. But could he deliver the goods?.....well, yes he could actually! Winning \$3,050.00 and the Rose Belt for making 540 miles in December of that year, the 2/1 favourite went on to beat that personal best score by 25 miles on the way making a brand new world-record of 565 miles for which he won a staggering \$17,967.00 (\$7,967.86 gate money, \$9,000.00 sweepstakes and \$1,000.00 for beating the record). Frank was also reported to have made \$3,600 by backing himself at long odds, thus giving him an overall total of \$21,567.86 for just under 6 days' work!

After that, Frank was a regular competitor at the big "walking matches" as they were often referred to. He won and came placed in many a race thereafter and for his efforts, he earned a substantial amount of money taking on other superstars in the sport, the likes of Patrick Fitzgerald, George Littlewood and the formidable Edward Payson Weston.

As they watched their idol sprinting passed them, the impressive figure of Frank Hart must have served as a real inspiration to the thousands of young "*colored*" lads in America at the time. Both black and white fans of the sport just loved Frank Hart, and the mere mention that he was on the list of competitors would have them scurrying down to the track where they would admire the efforts of one of the greatest black athletes ever to grace the track!