

# Napoleon Campana — ‘Old Sport’

By P.S. Marshall



**NAPOLEON CAMPANA, ALIAS “YOUNG SPORT.”**  
Born in Petersburg, Va., Sept. 17, 1836. Height, 5 feet 8 inches.

Peter Napoleon Campana would fit in perfectly in today’s modern-day professional wrestling scene where he would be the star attraction! The ex-fireman’s place in a race **WAS** the reason to pay the 25c required for admission to any of the races he was engaged in. ‘*Old Sport*’ was a legend and, alongside exhibiting his athletic prowess, he entertained the crowd with his wicked and warped sense of humour. Those who berated him in an aggressive manner were quickly dealt with as he was as clever with his fists too!

## Excerpts from *King of the Peds...*

In 1878, the *New York Times* wrote of him: Napoleon Campana, 43 years old, one of the kind a men who soon made themselves known and felt in any community, was fired by a recent pedestrian match in this city, and determined to undertake a walk himself. He came to this country from France when he was very young and was always interested in athletic sports and soon won for himself the name of “Young Sport.” He lived for some time in New York and Philadelphia. In New York he was a member of the Volunteer Fire Department, and was one of the “Fulton Market Boys.” When he was young in New York he was a newsboy, and sold the morning papers. About 15 years ago he came to Bridgeport and ever since worked hard for a living going about at times with a peddler’s wagon selling nuts and fruit, and at other times keeping a corner peanut stand. He soon became known in Bridgeport as an expert and fearless fireman, and did good service at several large fires. He was always a fast runner, and was noted for his courage and promptness of action in time of danger. He entered the New York Fire Department when quite young as a signal boy for hose Company No. 29. He next joined hose Company No. 2, and signaled his connection with the company by saving the life of a woman at a fire.

About three years ago he stopped a runaway team in East Main Street, East Bridgeport, saving several lives that were in imminent danger, and was severely injured. For this he was rewarded with a handsome gold medal and was presented with a new peddler’s wagon, in which he afterward carted about his fruit. The act was one involving so much danger, and one requiring such perfect fearlessness, that a more substantial testimonial was soon given him in the form of a ball. The new peddler’s wagon was put in the ball-room and the ball was one of the largest ever given in this city, with highly satisfactory, results to Campana’s pockets. He is free with his money when he has any as young as he was 20 years ago, and a great favorite with the young men and boys of Bridgeport.

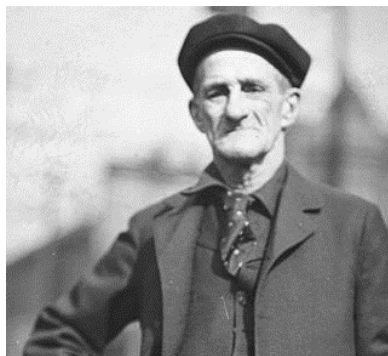
Campana looks, in the face, very much like Weston. He might almost be mistaken for Weston. He has the same wrinkles over his face, the same general features, and the same troubled expression; but he is a little larger than the better known pedestrian. He is about five feet eight inches high, very muscular and broader than Weston across the shoulders but smaller around the waist. He has a very slouching gait, not so bad as Hughes but without any of the style or grace of O’Leary. He carries his head usually

either thrown away back on his shoulders or drooping lazily down on his breast. He makes an unpleasant jerky motion of both shoulders with each step, and could not by any means be considered a walker. His most natural gait, apparently, is a little dog-trot of from five to six miles an hour, and this is his favorite method of getting along. Sometimes he breaks into a fast run, and occasionally he walks along very slowly. He does not look as old as he is but his remarkable costume has something to do with his youthful appearance.

***During the event Campana had attracted much interest, not just for his athletic abilities, but also for his eccentricity. Those paying the admission fee, of which half went to the pedestrian, would have been given the chance of buying a photograph of him at 50 cents a piece. They would have watched him run around the place followed occasionally by one of the three small dogs he kept near the track, which he patently loved to bits. The story goes that just before he commenced on his challenge to O'Leary's record, one of the city's best known citizens kicked one of the dogs. That wasn't a very good idea, because when Campana knew of it, he punched the offender, giving him a black eye. On the penultimate day it was said that he had refused to race at one stage unless a mirror was hung up, so that he could see himself. At many stages during the event, he was accompanied by someone else on the track to keep his interest up; these people usually being his attendants. On three evenings during the week he had been encouraged by tunes played by a drum corps which must have boosted his morale.***



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*News of Guyon's withdrawal was like music to the ears of Campana, and "like a surgeon be delighted in the crippled condition of his unfortunate companions of the sawdust. He joked poor Faber unmercifully and spared not the others. When Guyon departed he shouted exultingly and wanted to know who the next man was that he was going to kill. When he heard the rain on the roof he raised an umbrella and ambled along with a grin that was childlike and bland."*

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**When a "young tough smiled audibly" at him from the stands at 04:00, Campana, taking offence, threw a bottle he was carrying at the offender and tried to climb over the fence to give him a good hiding; but the police probably saved him the energy when they threw his tormentor out of the building.**

NB: A book, entitled: "*Old sport*"; or, *A sketch of the life of Peter Napoleon Campana—A life history of indomitable pluck, tireless energy, famous achievements and wide acquaintance with celebrities of the ring and race-track*", by the author, William Wilson Knott, was published in 1891.