

PEDESTRIANISM

aptain Robert Barclay Allardice backed himself to complete an extraordinary feat of physical endurance. He would walk 1,000 miles in 1,000 successive hours for 1,000 guineas - or more specifically, one mile in each and every hour of every day and night for almost six weeks. He would not sleep for more than an hour and a half at a time. The experts declared it impossible. But by mid-afternoon on 12 July 1809, the Scotsman was on the brink of proving them wrong.

As Captain Barclay (as he was popularly known) completed the final mile, heaving his stiff and aching body over the line at 3.37pm – 23 minutes within time – thousands of spectators crammed onto Newmarket Heath, Suffolk, let out an almighty roar and the town's church bells rang out in celebration. The captain's loyal servant, William Cross, prepared a hot bath for his employer, who was more than two stone lighter than when he had set out, his swollen legs ready to collapse with exhaustion. He was also more than 16,000 guineas richer, thanks to a multitude of side bets. Most importantly, Captain Barclay had become the undisputed king of the pedestrians the men and women routinely walking incredibly long distances against the clock, their challenges the forerunners to today's marathons and ultra-marathons.

FOR FANS AND GAMBLERS Pedestrianism itself was nothing new when Barclay took to his feet; humans

38

Mille.

Foster Powell was a forerunner - or fore-walker - of pedestrianism; he first competed in 1764, walking 50 miles in seven hours

HISTORYEXTRA.COM

Captain Barclay became known as 'The Celebrated Pedestrian' for his longdistance feats on his feet

> HN MORNTJON VETERAN PEDIATRIAN Norwich & Yarmouth

> > had been racing on foot since antiquity, after all. In Britain, both walking and running races had long been a staple of rural fairs, festivals and holy-day revels. And from the late-17th century, contests between 'running footmen' – a speedy breed of servant hired to run ahead of an employer's carriage had provided amusement for aristocrats. Endurance events of the kind favoured by Barclay really captured the public imagination in the 18th century, turning distance walking into a mainstream spectator sport, and the competing pedestrians into star athletes of the day.

The sport's popularity can, in part, be attributed to a growing scientific curiosity about the capabilities and limitations of the human body - an interest satisfied by this form of foot racing. Mostly, though, pedestrianism owed its rise to the Georgians' insatiable appetite for gambling. As with prize-fighting and horse-racing, a pedestrian endeavour was ideal for betting and wagering on the outcome, and it was this that fuelled its popularity with sports fans.

Before Barclay claimed the crown, attorney's clerk Foster Powell had been the nation's most celebrated pedestrian. In 1773, he made front-page news when, for a wager of 100 guineas, he walked 404 miles from London to York and back

GEORGE

On MONDAY Morning, the 7th July, 1817, at Four o Clock, SATURDAY the 26th July.

ABOVE: Advertisement for Wilson's attempt to best Captain Barclay

ABOVE LEFT: Many took up the sport; John Mountjoy walked 79 miles across Norfolk in six days, says this engraving

ABOVE RIGHT: The huge crowd meant George Wilson never finished his 1,000mile walk – he was arrested for disturbing the peace



comfortably within six days – in fact, arriving six hours early. He was greeted on his return to the capital by 3,000 people, all seeking a glimpse of the man who could cover distances as fast as any horse, and with no obvious signs of fatigue. It was a route Powell would tread another three times, shaving off another three hours in the process.

Where Powell led, huge numbers followed. Newspapers were littered with accounts of pedestrian exploits, while copy-cat challenges filled the betting books of gentlemen's clubs. Age was no barrier: in 1789, a Donald MacLeod walked 1,680 miles from Inverness to London and back, and then back to London again, reputedly at the age of 100. Nor was sex a hurdle: Irishwoman Mary McMullen toured around England, routinely performing her favourite 92-mile distance in 24 hours, well into her sixties. What's more, the umbrella term 'pedestrianism' didn't preclude racing another person instead of the clock; nor did it exclude runners. In 1807, Abraham

Wood, a celebrated distance runner from Lancashire, famed for covering 40 miles in less than five hours, took on Captain Barclay in a head-to-head to see who could go a greater distance in 24 hours. Barclay was gifted 20 miles on starting since he would be walking while Wood walked or ran as he pleased.

THE LONGER THE BETTER

The longer the distance, the more star power a pedestrian gained. And it was the drawn-out races that were the most risky ventures health-wise, as well as the most exciting for gamblers since the result was far less easy to predict. There was much hype when George Wilson attempted to top Barclay's 1,000 miles in 1815, aiming to cover the same distance, but in 20 days. The Times issued daily bulletins on his progress; and so crowded with onlookers was his course on London's Blackheath that attendants had to walk in front with whips to clear his path, and behind to stop people treading on his heels.

Even though Georgian audiences were well accustomed to people travelling on their own two feet out of necessity, they knew full well that such races







ABOVE: Edward Payson Weston became a pedestrian superstar in the US, first embarking on a more than 400-mile walk after losing a bet

LEFT: An 1877 poster for Weston's second race against Daniel O'Leary, who had beaten him two years earlier. Weston lost again

"Many pedestrians admitted occasionally performing poorly so as to encourage future bets being made against them"

 drew a fine line between exertion and exhaustion. Pedestrian feats were physically and mentally gruelling, particularly in an age without the luxuries of cushioned trainers, blister plasters or energy drinks. Though Captain Barclay walked back and forth on a carefully levelled half-mile course, he had few remedies for the aches, pains and crippling fatigue. His only aides were a pair of thick-soled shoes to avoid unnecessary pressure on the feet; a pair of soft, lambs-wool stockings; and a needle with which his attendants could poke him in order to keep him awake. And, unless he carried a lantern, Foster Powell probably had to walk much of his London to York route in the dark: since it

was early December, there were no street lamps, and he rested for only five hours each night.

Stamina was crucial to maintain an appropriately brisk pace for a prolonged period of time. If records are to be believed, many walkers kept up a steady six miles an hour for a considerable part of their distance, and runners often travelled more than eight miles an hour over 20 miles. Training was vigorous, though also comprised a detox, enforced 'sweats', and a meat-only diet.

However, the Georgian careerpedestrian was less concerned with speed, personal bests and record breaking, than ensuring the wager was won. There was no desire to hit a target too easily or the next would have to be considerably more difficult - indeed, many admitted occasionally performing poorly so as to encourage future bets being made against them.

In the end, it was pedestrianism's preoccupation with money and the inextricable link to gambling that would bring about the sport's downfall.

STADIUM EVENTS

Commercialisation proceeded at pace as the Victorian era dawned. The spread of industrialisation and increased traffic on the turnpike roads forced pedestrians to find new spaces, and entrepreneurial publicans spotted a lucrative opportunity. They began to enclose ground near their taverns and offered up specially constructed courses for foot races of all kinds, charging punters for admission and offering prize pots, or a cut of the door fees, to the competitors.

It proved a phenomenally successful business model. With football still in its infancy, pedestrianism enjoyed a boom period in Britain in the 1840s and 50s, especially popular with the working classes. Grounds like Hackney Wick in London and Copenhagen Grounds in Manchester could accommodate crowds of 10,000 or more, congregating to watch 'peds' participating in 'champion belt' or 'championship cup' competitions. Increasingly, races got shorter – four, six or 10 miles usually - since gambling was then equally fast paced.

The Victorians took the sport to the outposts of the empire and the US. where it particularly thrived. Stars like Edward Payson Weston sometimes ran the legs off their British counterparts. In 1867, Weston walked over 1,200 miles from Portland, Maine, to Chicago in 26 days. Especially popular on both sides of the Atlantic were six-day races, where contestants had from midnight on a Sunday through to midnight the following Saturday to cover as many miles as possible on a circular track.

Tens of thousands of people watched Weston take on fellow American Daniel O'Leary in a head-to-head race at the

on the first day.

1788

START



seven days, covering 80 miles a day.

Taking big steps

Pedestrianism and huge numbers go hand in hand...

The estimated total amount bet on Captain Barclay's (left) 1,000-mile challenge, equivalent to around £40 million today.

777

John Batty, aged 55, walked 700 miles in 14 days, covering 59 miles

Foster Powell (above) walked 100 miles in 21 hours and 35 minutes.

A Mr Eustace walked more than 200 miles from Liverpool to London in four days at the age of 77.

1810

1792

560A Mr Rimmington, a farmer from Dorset, walked 560 miles in

811

A Mr Yeardley walked 42 miles in 6 hours and 10 minutes, an average of seven miles an hour.

FINISH

Three walking wonders

In a plethora of pedestrians, these stars of the sport put their best foot forward



Captain Robert Barclay

▲ Unlike most in pedestrianism – a sport needing no money to undertake – Captair Barclay was a gentleman landowner, as well as a soldier in the British Army. A matter of days after completing his 1,000-mile walk, he left England to fight Napoleon's forces in the Walcheren Campaign. His training methods, outlined in 1813's *Pedestrianism*, set a blueprint for the next pedestrians.

Madame Ada Anderson

► A former actor, Ada Anderson became Britain's most celebrated female pedestrian. She famously outdid Captain Barclay several times in 1878, walking 1,008 miles in under 672 hours, and then 1,500 miles in 1,000 hours. Travelling to America to compete, Anderson inspired many women to follow in her footsteps.



in 2,700 quarter-hours, completed at Mozart Garden, New York. As she was leaving crowd pulled her carriage along themselver.

Edward Payson Weston

▲ Weston kick-started his career in 1861 by walking over 400 miles from Boston to Washington, DC, for Abraham Lincoln's presidential inauguration. The 'father of six-day racing' later became an advocate for exercise, warning of the danger to health posed by automobiles. Ironically, a collision with a taxi in the 1920s left him unable to walk.

"Having begun the 19th century on a triumphant high, pedestrianism limped towards a terminal decline"

 Agricultural Hall, London, in 1877, both covering more than 500 miles, though O'Leary came out the winner. The contest inspired the creation of the Astley Belt race, billed as the first official world pedestrian championship. But by the 1870s, the sport's reputation had been tarnished. The jumble of separately promoted events, all over different distances and with different rules, and the lack of central regulation alienated fans. The resulting champion titles and records had no legitimacy, not least as the sport had long been dogged by allegations of cheating, match-fixing, impersonation and sabotage.

So having begun the 19th century on a triumphant high, with Captain Barclay achieving what no man had done on two feet before, pedestrianism limped towards the end in terminal decline. It was eventually marginalised by the amateur athletics movement, with its strict rules, central governing body, and an ideology that prioritised personal achievement over profit.

The great pedestrians of the past century had been tainted by overcommercialisation, their feats overlooked and undervalued. But it was they who got us hooked on foot racing in the first place and who set the pace for athletes in decades to come. •



'Peds' were vulnerable to attack from gamblers looking for a certain result