

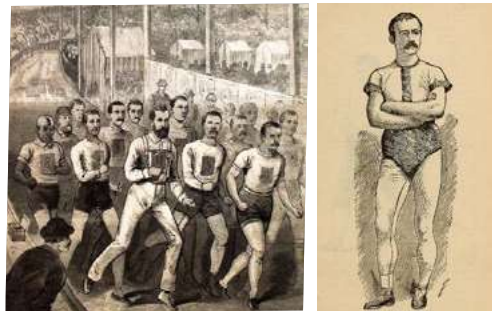
Victorian Ultrarunners

If you were told by somebody that, in Victorian times, men competed against each other in gruelling races, with some covering over 100 miles a day for six straight days on indoor sawdust tracks, you would say, "I just don't believe you!" or "You've got to be kidding?!"

Getting just a few hours of rest per day in makeshift huts and literally 'eating and drinking on the trot', these pioneering 'ultra-ultra' long-distance athletes underwent tremendous hardships — all in the name of sport.



'Pedestrianism' (walking and running races) was a huge spectator sport back in the 1870s and '80s. Indeed, in 1879, when these races were at their most popular, the world was gripped with what was known as the 'Pedestrian Mania'. Often referred to as 'walking matches' or 'go-as-you-please races', these events took place worldwide with the best of the "peds" (as the professional pedestrians who competed in them were affectionately known) being rewarded with potentially huge prize money, a share of the gate receipts and dazzling ornamental gold belts from ruthless promoters who made lucrative livings from the thousands of screaming spectators who flocked to watch them. Indeed, this hugely popular 19th Century sport was the 'must see' spectator event of its time and those who witnessed it were thrilled by the unbelievable sight before them.



And guess what? Would you also believe that an Englishman called Charlie Rowell (right), aka 'Cambridge Wonder' (front right on image of the start of the 5th Astley Belt race, Madison Square Garden, New York) won just under \$38,000 in just two races in 1879? That's equivalent to \$997,000 or £712,000 in today's money! The same man covered an astonishing total of 150 miles in 22 hours and 30 minutes on the very first day of a six day go-as-you-please race in 1882 — a record not beaten for many years.



Talking of records... Did you realise that another Englishman called George Littlewood (right), aka the 'Sheffield Flyer' ran a six-day indoor record of 623¾ miles, again in New York, but this time in 1888? That world record distance was beaten 96 years later, but on an outdoor track which wasn't 8 laps to the mile, which wasn't in a tobacco laden atmosphere and which wasn't against 40 or so other competitors. No, *he did it with the added benefit of modern footwear, a much more educated diet — and the rest! Also, and to show what an amazing all-round athlete Littlewood was, he STILL owns the world's oldest athletics world record from, as long ago as 1882, for walking 531 miles in six days on a 13-lap to-the-mile sawdust track, in Sheffield, England. Beat that!

**Yiannis Kouros, a 28-year-old Greek runner didn't think George Littlewood's 1888 record was "humanly possible" when he set off in the New York "Six-Day Run" on the all-weather track at Downing Stadium, Randall's Island, on Monday, July the 2nd 1984.*



3rd Astley Belt Race Gilmore's Garden, New York, March, 1879 Rowell and Ennis help Harriman

Like modern day sports stars, these Victorian sporting superstars had tremendous pulling power and the punters just loved them! Cheering for the likes of 'Black Dan', 'Blower Brown', the 'Flying Collier', and the 'Wily Wobbler' (an American, who, in England, in 1876, attracted well over a quarter of a million people to watch him perform in a matter of weeks), the turnstiles couldn't click fast enough to get them all in.

For the basic admission price of say 25 cents, or a shilling, the spellbound could watch the races either within the confines of the track, or, for double that amount, a seat in the galleries. The events also pulled in the ladies. The attraction for them was not only the sight of the colourfully costumed competitors, but their muscular frames as well!



Race action—the 5th Astley Belt contest, Madison Square Garden, New York, 1879

Performing bands had a major influence on the performance of the athletes on the track, and the majority of the "peds" would respond positively to the musician's efforts by sprinting around the track in response to popular 'numbers' of the time.

Bookmakers, more often than not, were present at the tracks where their presence could cause some problems for the promoters of the events. Big money was placed on the outcomes of races, and sometimes there were attempts to influence the result — with pepper, bricks and, yes, poison!

George Cartwright (right), aka as the 'Walsall Flyer' or the 'Flying Collier' — who was a superb long-distance runner, gets confronted by a disgruntled punter in a six-day event at the Bingley Hall, Birmingham, England.

King of the Peds, which concisely covers the history of this fascinating sport, provides a build up to the races, focuses on the personalities involved and provides pre-race and post-race interviews. From the start to the finish, the performances of the participating "peds" are covered in detail with comparisons being made to previous races.

Learn more about pedestrianism at: www.kingofthepeds.com

P.S. Marshall (is author of *King of the Peds*; "*Weston, Weston, Rah-Rah-Rah!*"; *Richard Manks and the Pedestrians*, and is co-author of *A Man in a Hurry*)

