

King of the Peds

(CONTINUED)...was at its height in 1879 when North America, Great Britain and Australasia, were swept away with the phenomenon of what was called the "*Pedestrian Mania*".

Pedestrianism was a massive spectator sport and the big guns at the time were able to attract thousands of spectators to the indoor tracks in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the USA. Indeed, these men had the pulling power of yesteryear and modern-day sports stars like Muhammad Ali, Tiger Woods, Novak Djokovic and Sir Donald Bradman.

Then, in 1867, and with certain conditions applying, the "*Wily Wobbler*" proposed to walk from Portland, Maine, to Chicago, a distance of 1,226 miles in 26 days. Again the book enlightens the reader as to his daily progress, which is covered in great detail.

Thereafter, and from 1869 till 1874, the book concentrates on Weston's various attempts to make certain distances in certain times culminating in trying to break through the 500-mile barrier by walking that distance in six consecutive days. Weston really captured the public's imagination. He was watched and cheered everywhere he performed and his efforts at the time were both praised and ridiculed in the media.

Before Weston's exploits in Britain are covered from 1875, another up-and-coming professional pedestrian's career is analysed. The "*Plucky Pedestrian*" was a Chicago-based Irishman called Daniel O'Leary. He would ultimately win the hearts of the people of his adopted city with some gutsy performances against "time" and against a string of opponents, including Weston, on home soil and in other cities, which included San Francisco, St Louis and New York.

O'Leary then followed Weston to England where the two performed separately in front of thousands of people again against "time" but also against the best athletes Britain could throw at them, before taking on each other at the Agricultural Hall, in London, in April, of 1877 (O'Leary would later go on to promote the "*O'Leary Belt*" races as they were called. Again, these are covered in full in the book).

The book then follows the careers of the pair as Weston concentrates on performing in front of thrilled audiences up and down the length of Britain in feats of endurance, whilst O'Leary, after a period of competition in the USA, returns back to England.

It is at this juncture that the reader is introduced to Sir John Astley, a Member of Parliament, who takes a great interest in the sport of pedestrianism. A real character himself, Sir John devised the 142-hour or six-day "go-as-you-please" races which allowed the participants to "walk, trot, run, mix, lift or introduce a new style of

pedestrianism if clever enough," and which were to prove so popular with the fans of the sport.

The 1st "*International Astley Belt*" race took place in London, in March, of 1878. The book covers the race in full as it does all the subsequent "*International Astley Belt*" races in London and New York, until the prize was won outright in London, in June, of 1881.

The English version of the Astley Belt, or the "Long Distance Champion of England" races are also featured in the book. Originally these were over a similar period of time to their international counterparts, but, from 1882, they were reduced to 72 hours, or 12 hours per day.

I did mention earlier about Weston's feats of endurance. In 1879, Weston attempted to make 2,000 miles by walking round the shires of England in 1,000 hours. This feat is exclusively covered in the book and provides fascinating insight into how much pulling power the "*father of pedestrianism*" had at the time. He later successfully walked 5,000 miles in 100 days, again in England, in 1883. This feat, however, was beaten by a Scotsman on a 44-lap to the mile sawdust track in the same period of time in New York between 1884 and 1885.

Noremac (Cameron spelt backwards) was a name devised to attract the attention of a public who were eager to attend anything to do with the sport. Other nicknames for example were: *Black Dan*, *'Blower Brown'*, the *'Brooklyn Cobbler'*, the *'Cambridge Wonder'*, the *'Flying Collier'* and the *'Sharp Sheffield Blade'*.

As mentioned earlier, the races were well received worldwide, but it was in America, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, where the real action took place, and where the big prize money was fought for. The really "big matches" took place in London and New York, but there were also many "walking matches" (as they were affectionately known) in the following worldwide locations: Aberdeen, Baltimore, Birmingham, Boston (Massachusetts), Bristol, Buffalo, Cardiff, Cincinnati, Chicago, Christchurch, Dunedin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Kansas City, Lawrence (Massachusetts), Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Melbourne, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, New Orleans, Nottingham, Newark (New Jersey), Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Providence, San Francisco, Sheffield, Sydney, Trenton (New Jersey) and Wellington.

Such was the pull of these events that in 1879, a certain young man from England actually won close to \$50,000 in just two races! The *'Cambridge Wonder'* would think nothing of making 140 miles during his first day, and indeed, made 150 miles in 22½ hours in one of the books featured races in New York, in 1882.

The professionals would often cross over the Atlantic to compete in front of hoards of enthusiastic fans of the sport. The pull of these men was enormous, and like present-day internationally renowned sportsmen, the likes of Bridgeport's "*Old Sport*" Campana, Boston's "*Black Dan*" (Frank Hart), Sheffield's Littlewood, Chicago's O'Leary,

Cambridge's Rowell, New Zealand's Joe Scott and Providence's Weston, participating in a contest, would have the punters scurrying off to the tracks to watch the fun!

For the basic admission price of say 25 cents, or a shilling, the gathered 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! Indeed, one such lady was so enamoured with one of the participants, that a chapter is devoted to their consequential romantic relationship, albeit, at the expense of her marriage!

As well as the sport on offer, other attractions designed to get the turnstiles clicking away included "all the fun of the fair", the barrooms and music. The performing bands had a major influence on the athletes on the track and the majority of the "peds" would respond positively to the musician's efforts by "spurting" around the path. Hence the likes of '*Yankee Doodle*', '*Captain Jinks*', '*Rocky Road to Dublin*', '*Hail to the Chief*', '*Pop Goes the Weasel*' and '*Pinafore*' numbers, were very well-received.

"Eleven to eight Littlewood, six to four Rowell!" — If permitted to ply their trade on the course, the bookmakers would be shouting out the odds to eager punters willing to bet a bob or two on the winner, or 50 cents a place. Their presence, however, could also cause many problems for the managers who promoted the events, because where the firms operated there was bound to be trouble! Big money was placed on the outcomes of races, and naturally, and as a result, there were attempts to influence the outcome. Thus, some attempts were made to disable the athletes. Indeed, it was as a result of those bad bookies that a riot ensued at a race meeting in London, in 1887, and this, and the resulting damage, is covered in another fascinating chapter.

Everything written in *King of the Peds* is historical fact. The races; the build-up to them; the personalities involved; pre-race and post-race interviews with the managers, backers and trainers, are all covered. What the book also offers is an in-depth analysis of the big races of the time. From the start to the finish, the performances of the participating "peds" are covered in detail. Comparisons are made with previous races, and world record attempts, of which there are many, are recorded.

So with a fascinating storyline, a host of real characters, incredible feats of endurance, skullduggery, rioting, comedy, romance and a murder and suicide which involved one of the "peds" themselves, all in all, *King of the Peds* offers the reader a "ringside" seat during one of the greatest sporting spectacles the world has witnessed.

Finally, readers are invited to sit in a worldwide jury. After being offered all the evidence followed by a final summing-up, they are invited to pick for themselves their choice for the title of...

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