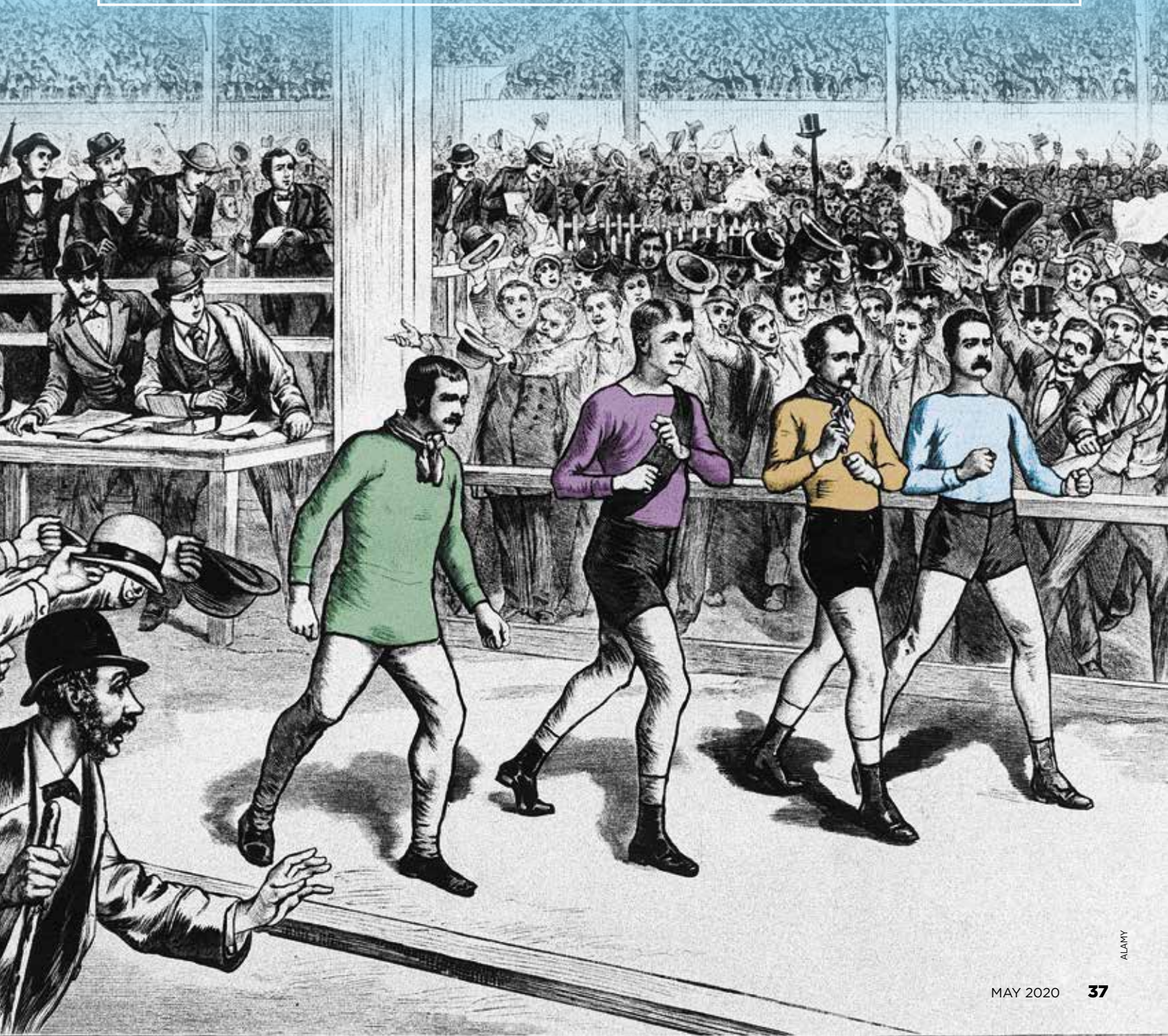
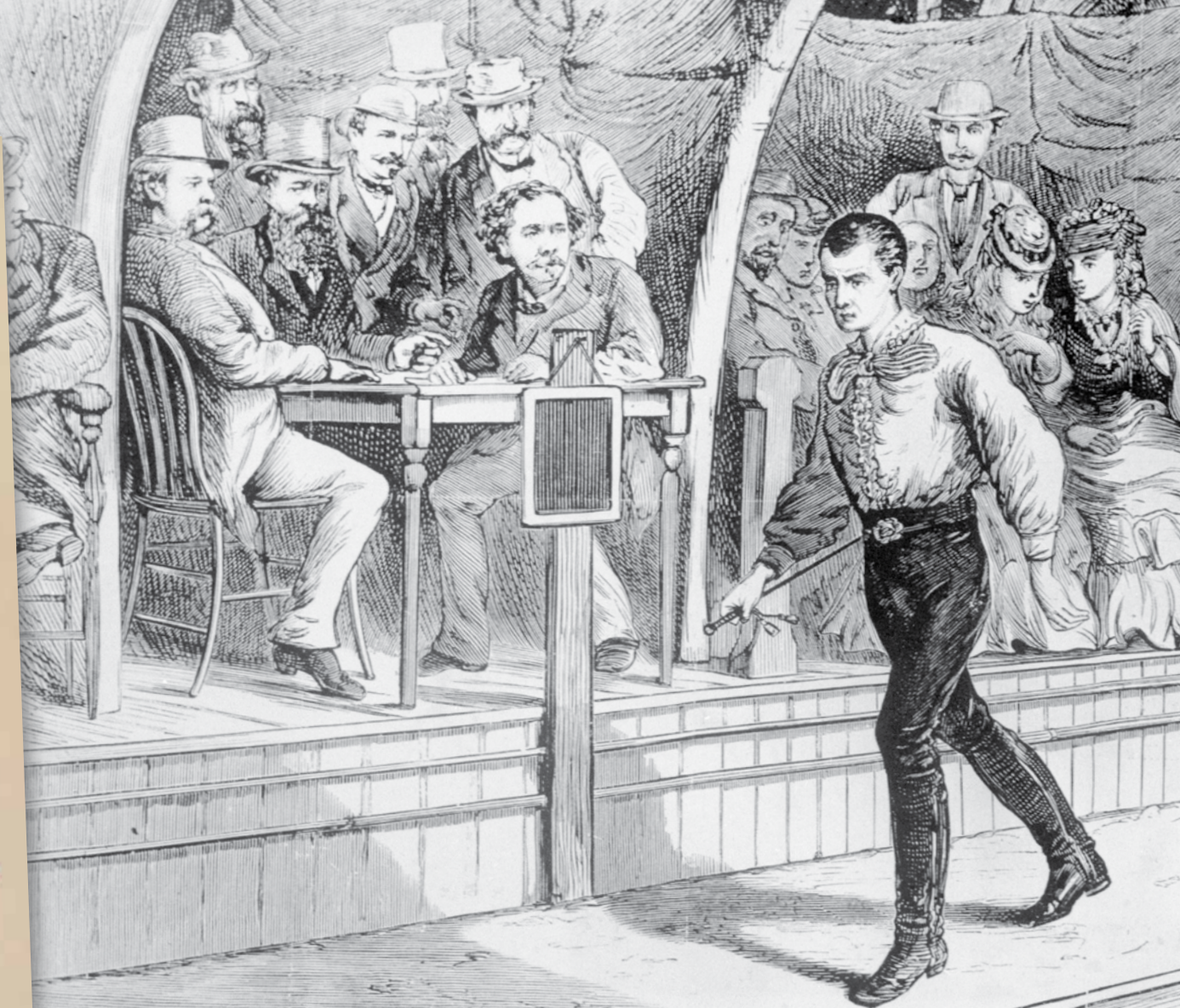


On your marks, get set... walk!

Felicity Day tries out a favourite sport of the 18th and 19th centuries: competitive walking





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 career-pedestrian 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.

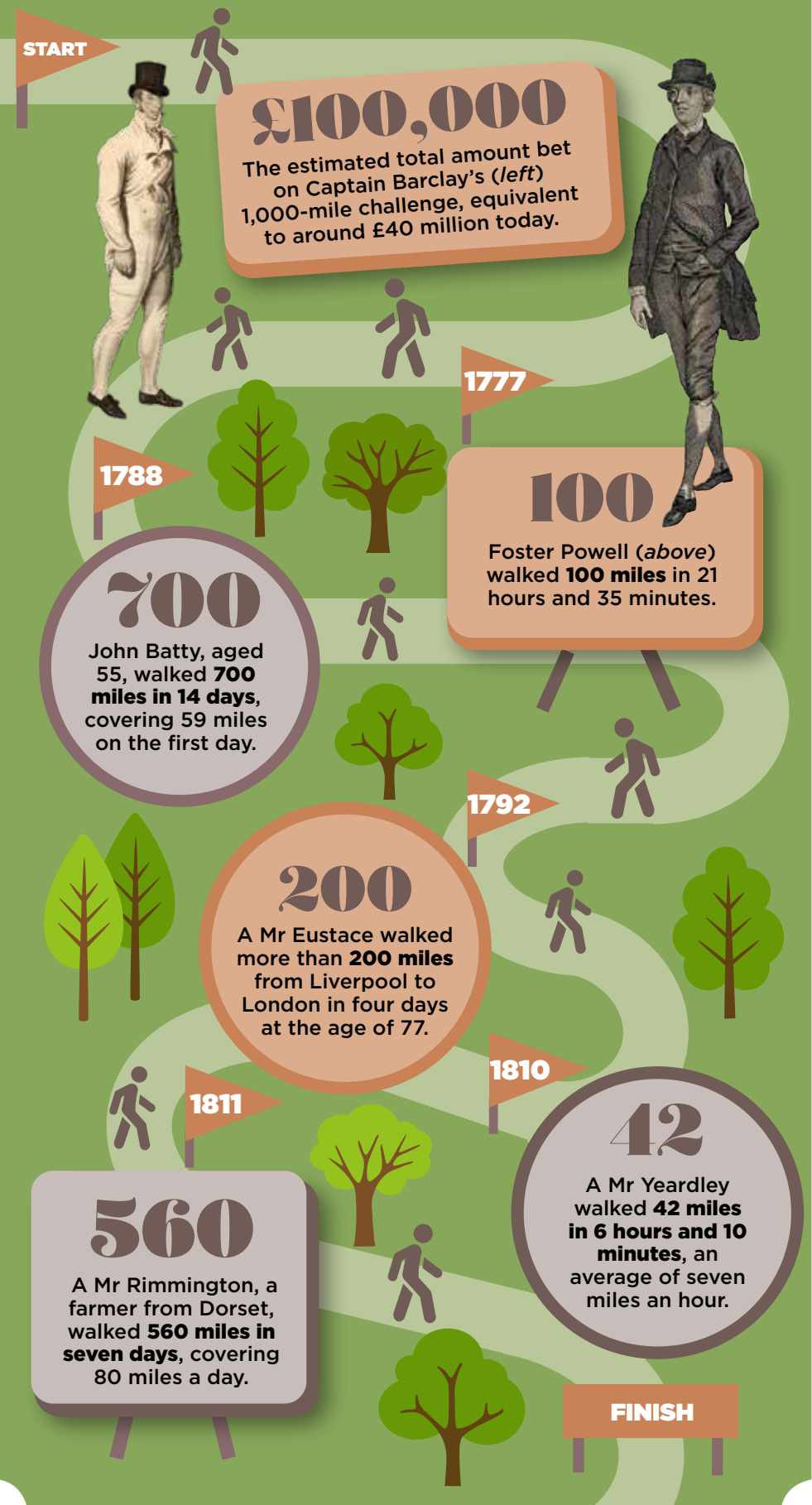
It proved a phenomenally successful business model. With football still in its infancy, pedestrianism enjoyed a boom period in Britain in the 1840s and 50s, especially popular with the working classes. Grounds like Hackney Wick in London and Copenhagen Grounds in Manchester could accommodate crowds of 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

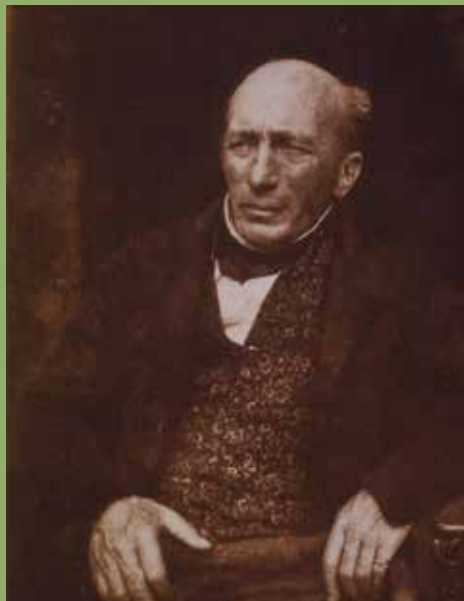
Taking big steps

Pedestrianism and huge numbers go hand in hand...



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 – Captain 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.



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 over-commercialisation, 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