

Pedestrianism and the struggle for the Sir John Astley belt, 1878-1879

John A. Lucas

Pennsylvania State University
University Park, Pennsylvania

During the eighth decade of the nineteenth century, the American sporting scene was enriched by a series of five fabulous international pedestrian races. Sir John Astley, the English sporting baron, inaugurated the transatlantic six-day and six-night marathon races. These quintuple struggles roused nationalistic pride and sporting blood on two continents, were witnessed by tens of thousands, and resulted in feats of unprecedented human endurance.

No more incredible sport event has ever taken place in New York's old Madison Square Garden than that of six-day marathon running. Of all terrestrial creatures, the one animal officially having recorded the greatest feats of endurance running is man himself. The combination of muscle, lung-power, indomitable will, and powerful incentives is more than a match for any beast. No greater proof can be found than in some of the remarkable exploits of late nineteenth century six-day marathon runners.

Pedestrianism, or the art of rapidly covering great distances on foot, originated in England. From 1765 to 1820 the names of Steward, Foster Powell, the legendary Captain Barclay, Abraham Wood, and Daniel Crisp were widely known to the sporting public of Great Britain.¹ Organized footracing arrived in America in 1835 at the Union Race Course, Long Island on April 24.² Forty thousand spectators saw Henry Stannard exhibit "genuine Yankee agility and bottom," and become the first American to run 10 miles in less than an hour.³ On October 16 and November 19, 1844, two international long-distance matches took place at the Beacon Course near New York City. The London and New York press considered them headline news.⁴ Between 1845 and 1862, two Americans traveled to England for a series of profitable races. William Howitt, alias William Jackson, better known as "The American Deer," and Louis Bennett, who took the pseudonym "Deerfoot," rewrote the record book at distances up to 20 miles.⁵ The arrival of Edward Payson Weston marked a new era in American pedestrianism. From 1861 till his last race in 1913, it is estimated that

¹ Pedestrian feats. *Every Saturday*, July 11, 1868, pp. 46-50.

² For interesting accounts of this important race, see Jennie Holliman, *American sports (1785-1835)* (Durham, N. C.: Seaman Press, 1931), p. 154; Philip Hone, *The diary of Philip Hone 1828-1851*, Allan Nevins, Ed. Vol. I. (Dodd, Mead and Co., 1927), p. 157.

³ *New York Times*, April 25, 1835, p. 2. This reference is from the old *New York Times*, founded May 12, 1834, ceased publication October 17, 1837.

⁴ *The Spirit of the Times*. (New York, October 19, 1844, p. 402 and November 23, 1844, p. 462; *The Illustrated London Times*, January 11, 1845, p. 21.

⁵ Ralph H. Gabriel (Ed), *Annals of American sport*, Vol. XV. Early professional races, by John Allen Krout (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929), p. 186; William B. Curtis, By-gone international athletic contests. *Outing*, Vol. XXXVI (July, 1900), p. 350; James S. Mitchell, Athletic giants of the past, *Outing*, Vol. XXVIII (1901), p. 269.

he covered over one hundred thousand miles in competitive pedestrian tramps. It was Weston who first accomplished 500 miles on an indoor track in less than six days and six nights.

For one brief decade, 1875-1885, the professional sport of pedestrianism reached heights of intense interest in several of the major cities of the United States. The five contests for the famous Sir John Astley belt during 1878 and 1879 brought together the finest walkers and runners from Europe and America in a sort of international "world series." Never before or since has the harsh and peculiar art of alternately walking and running hundreds of miles been so popular.

Sir John Dugdale Astley, baronet, member of the British parliament, announced in January, 1878, a series of six-day "go-as-you please" walking and running contests for the "long distance challenge championship of the world." Sir John, the "Sporting Baron," guaranteed \$4,000 in prizes and a belt of great price and beauty to the winner of the first match. Each of the proposed five contests was to be carried on with the understanding that the winner was to defend his claim against anyone, of any nationality, "civilized or barbarian." The stage was set. Tens of thousands of Londoners and New Yorkers crowded Agricultural Hall and Gilmore's Madison Square Garden during the five races spread over an 18-month period.

The First Astley Belt Competition

Preparations had been completed in London for the clash of England's best versus Daniel O'Leary, the undefeated Irish-American race walker. He had emigrated to America in 1866 and immediately gained fame for his feats of endurance. In April 1875, he became the second man ever to cover 500 miles on an indoor track during a six-day and six-night marathon contest. He duplicated the feat in November of that year, winning \$5,000 and vanquishing the great Edward Payson Weston with a score of 501¼ miles.⁶

Seventeen Englishmen began walking on a track measuring seven laps to the mile while O'Leary walked in solitary splendor on an inner track measuring eight laps to the mile. The scene was laid in London's Agricultural Hall. Trainers, coaches, advisers, masseurs, physicians, dieticians and chefs, timers, lap counters, and judges all were on hand to play their respective roles. The English sport had reached a point of sophistication that was the envy of its American counterpart. At 1 AM, Monday morning, March 18, 1878, the race began. The athletes tramped endlessly and in the beginning, effortlessly, around the circular path. They rarely rested more than a few hours of every twenty-four.

At one o'clock on the morning of March 23, Daniel O'Leary had covered 457 miles and was resting in his tent located on the infield. Harry Vaughan of Chester, England, had closed the gap by completing 443 miles and three laps. The Englishman "Blower" Brown was in third place, with more than 400 miles. O'Leary resumed running but was soon near collapse. He managed to hold off both Englishmen and at noon was 21 miles in the lead. Hopes of a close finish were dashed when Vaughan was forced to stumble to his tent and rest, being absent from the track exactly fifty-one minutes. O'Leary now held a 24-mile lead and, though in great pain, kept moving. There were nine hours remaining in the short week of 144 hours.

⁶ William E. Harding, *The pedestrian manual. History of the Astley and O'Leary belts*, p. 6. (New York: McGlew & Jacques, Publishers, 1880).

Vaughan got within 20 miles of O'Leary at 6 PM. By 7 PM it was 497 miles for Vaughan and 516 miles for O'Leary. At exactly 7:38 PM Vaughan completed his 500th mile amidst great cheers from the partisan crowd. The ordeal finally ended with O'Leary's winning total of 520 miles completed in 139 hours.⁷ Vaughan had scaled Olympian heights in surpassing 500 miles while the colorful veteran, "Blower" Brown, had a hard-earned total of 477 miles. None of the others finished and therefore they earned no prize money. Daniel O'Leary took his small fortune and already famous Astley belt home to Chicago and declared he would not part with it "till some better man come and fetch it away." Sir John's belt was made of five solid plates of silver with a solid gold buckle in the center. The gold centerpiece contained the words "Long Distance Champion of the World," while the fine silverwork showed figures of walkers and runners.

Second Encounter for the Astley Belt

Sir John Astley decreed that Daniel O'Leary's newest challenger would be John Hughes, the well-known New Yorker, by way of Tipperary, Ireland. The match was scheduled in New York from September 30 to October 5, 1878. The belt, a \$10,000 first prize, a generous portion of the gate receipts, side-bets, and the adulation of the mob awaited the winner. Over 30,000 spectators found their way into Madison Square Garden during the abbreviated week's contest. O'Leary, the "perfect runner," completely outclassed his rival and returned home a wealthy man.⁸

At the start of the unusual two-man affair, O'Leary struck off at a long body-swinging walk while Hughes fled the first five miles in thirty-five minutes and forty-one seconds, two miles ahead of his rival. There were two tracks, O'Leary selecting the longer one-eighth of a mile surface, while Hughes worked on the inner nine-laps-to-the-mile track. Members of the Harlem Athletic Club kept the scores in three separate books, each lap being called out distinctly to both men. Hughes had a tent erected at one end of the arena, where he was attended by his wife and trainer. O'Leary occupied one of the rooms in the main building.

It was evident that the champion was working more to beat Hughes than to break any records. The match was concluded at eleven o'clock on Saturday night, October 5th, by which time O'Leary had covered 403 miles and Hughes 310. During the last hours, a gold watch was presented the winner, to add to his already impressive earnings.⁹

The Crucial Third Match

One more victory and O'Leary would be permanent owner of the coveted Astley belt. Ever since it had left the United Kingdom, English pedestrians had anxiously inquired as to who should attempt regaining the prize. Sir John consulted with his sporting friends, Lord Balfour and the Prince of Wales. Both enthusiastically endorsed young Charles Rowell, boatkeeper and part-time pedestrian, who was destined to be one of England's greatest nineteenth century athletes.

⁷ Edward Plummer, *The American championship record and a history of mixing races*, p. 23. (New York: Snowden and Beaudine, 1881).

⁸ The Hughes-O'Leary contest, *New York Sportsman*, October 5, 1878, p. 164.

⁹ Walking for the championship, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 19, 1878, p. 115.

Four athletes took their places at the starting line at 1 AM, March 10, 1879. Madison Square Garden was jammed at this incongruous hour. The police had difficulty restraining a mob of several thousand that had been refused admittance. The thirty-one year old Daniel O'Leary, 5'8", 148 pounds, was on hand to defend his championship belt. The tiny twenty-five year old ex-boatman, Charles Rowell, was a "sprinter" at 20-50-mile races and had never attempted a six-day "go-as-you-please" grind. John Ennis, thirty-seven, veteran walker, had had but one experience at this type of major competition. The fourth man was Charles A. Harriman, a young man, big for the sport at 6'1/2" and 170 pounds. His reputation had been made as Massachusetts champion at 100 mile and 36-hour runs.

The most competent judges in the city were on hand, including the famous American sportsman, William B. Curtis. Hourly bulletins of the pedestrians' progress were posted in the city's hotels, barber shops, bar-rooms, cigar stores, and corner grocery stores. The New York press carried daily, full-page spreads of the world's championship match. As soon as the race began it became evident that O'Leary was not well and by Wednesday he was unable to rest or retain food. The Irish-American champion was forced to retire with only 215 miles, but denied persistent rumors that he had been drugged. The three remaining runners were averaging eighty miles a day through Thursday.

On Friday morning, although the admission fee had been raised to one dollar, the crowds increased. Amidst cheers and the beat of the band, the trio walked and ran endlessly around the sawdust-tanbark track. By Friday evening, Rowell had accumulated 417 miles to 390 for Harriman and 387 for John Ennis. The final day was Saturday and the unruly crowd spilled onto the track and taunted the plucky Rowell. Both Ennis and Harriman instantly addressed the audience and threatened to abandon the contest should harm come to the leader of the race. The three men clasped hands amidst thunderous applause and circled the track together.¹⁰

As always, the exhausting extended marathon had taken its toll. At 8:45 PM, Saturday evening, an utterly spent Harriman stopped the self-inflicted torture as he completed his 450th mile. At 9 PM, Charles Rowell completed 500 miles amidst "utmost enthusiasm" and stopped. Ennis kept at it. The veteran, who was to continue competing well into the next century, was presented with flowers as he completed his 474th mile. In appreciation, he immediately began sprinting. The delighted crowd cheered as he spun around the track, racing the last mile in 6 minutes and 55 seconds.

The unprecedented throngs resulted in a fantastic \$20,000 being paid the new champion, Charles Rowell. Ennis took home \$11,800, while Harriman was content with \$8,200. Rowell, the man who could "strike a 7 mph dog trot and keep it up for an interminable period," had won a fortune. As he left the stadium draped in the American flag and weighted down with the gold and silver belt, Sir John was heard to quip that it was, "a pretty good haul for a man who seldom had two sovereigns to rub against each other."¹¹ Waiting at the exit to immediately lodge a formal challenge was possibly the greatest pedestrian the world has ever known, the American, Edward Payson Weston.

¹⁰ Two pages of illustrated materials and race commentary may be found in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, March 29, 1879, pp. 48, 55.

¹¹ John Dugdale Astley, *Fifty years of my life in the world of sport at home and abroad* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1894), p. 156.

Weston and the Fourth Astley Belt.

Edward Payson Weston was the supreme showman of the pedestrian world and he was ready for this race. Born in Providence, Rhode Island, on March 15, 1839, he was the most famous "ped" in the world, and was known as the "Father of American Pedestrianism." His record-breaking feats of endurance on two continents were legendary. He could sprint a hundred miles with the best or walk twenty hours a day for a month. During the drama of the third Astley belt match, Weston was engaged in an incredible journey on foot throughout Great Britain. He walked 2,000 miles in exactly 1,000 hours, a physical feat of nearly unbelievable proportions. During that time, he never walked on Sundays and he delivered a brief temperance lecture in almost every community he passed through.¹² In April 1879, Weston finished fifth in a six-day go-as-you-please race in London. He totaled 450 miles, while the winner, the indefatigable "Blower" Brown, logged an impressive and recordbreaking 542 miles.

The fourth match began on Monday morning, June 16, 1879, at Agricultural Hall, London. Four contestants were prepared to match strides with one another. "Blower" Brown was installed as favorite. Weston was the choice of Sir John. John Ennis and William E. Harding were on hand for a piece of the money. The great Charles Rowell sat glumly in the audience, having "run a peg into his right heel," while the physically exhausted Daniel O'Leary had temporarily retired.

Weston, the temperate health faddist, could run as well as walk and he charged through 120 miles in the first day. The magnificent Brown kept with him every mile. By Tuesday, Harding was already "looking very queer," and Ennis was seized with cramps. On Wednesday morning at the impossible hour of 3 AM., Brown wrested the lead from Weston, opening a gap of 7 miles with a total of 227 record-breaking miles. During the next twenty-four hours, the great Weston kept within striking distance of the veteran Englishman. On Friday, the fifth day, Weston made his move, covered 73 miles, and took the lead. He was impressive as he alternately walked and ran the endless laps with an inexorable and fluid stride, a portrait of "iron-like legs and indomitable will." Brown succumbed under the ordeal, his swollen knee forcing him off the track for five hours, following repeated pleas from his doctor.

Weston never faltered and a few minutes before 11 PM, Saturday, he completed "the greatest pedestrian task of which the world has any knowledge."¹³ He had covered 550 miles in less than six days. Brown had run 452, Ennis 180, and Harding 147, the last two having dropped out early in the week.¹⁴ Weston was \$8,000 richer and looked forward to the inevitable challenge, this time from the previous belt winner, Charles Rowell. The fifth and final match for the Sir John Astley belt was arranged.

The Fifth Astley Belt

The familiar scene was the Garden in New York City, shortly after midnight on Monday, September 22, 1879. Weston and Rowell were on hand as was the

¹² Walter H. Moler, *Weston and his walks—the wonderful record of Edward Payson Weston*. Souvenir program, 1910.

¹³ Weston and the championship, *The Turf, Field and Farm*, June 27, 1879, p. 410.

¹⁴ Further accounts of the Fourth Astley Belt race may be found in *Harper's Weekly*, July 12, 1879, p. 543; *The Turf, Field and Farm*, June 20, 1879, p. 396; *New York Times*, June 22, 1879, p. 1.

perennial Ennis. George Hazael of England, George Guyon of Canada, and Peter Panchot had records of running more than 400 miles in this kind of competition. Also seeking fame and fortune was the Negro champion from Boston, Frank Hart. Fred Krohne of Germany and Samuel Merritt of Bridgeport, Connecticut, with successful pedestrian backgrounds, were entered, while lesser personalities named Taylor, Jackson, Federmeier, and Dutcher completed the group of thirteen starters. Daniel O'Leary, still in poor health, was in the stands and kept close watch over his protégé, Frank Hart.

The capacity crowd of 7500 had been undaunted by the one dollar admission fee. They were in a betting mood and the ever-present gamblers were doing a brisk business. The odds offered were one and one-half to one against Rowell, two and one-half to one against Weston and three to one against Hazael. The New York papers had given full-page descriptions of the pending match.¹⁵ Thirteen tents had been assigned to the athletes and were neatly arranged around the track. Here they would rest, eat, sleep and receive medical treatment during the six days and nights. Few would allow themselves more than eighteen hours in their tents during the torturous 144-hour contest. The eight-laps-to-the-mile track had a foundation of fine tanbark with an eight foot wide surface of well-groomed and hard-packed loam. It was pronounced in excellent shape.

At 1 AM the long tramp began. Hazael immediately moved out at a swift, long-losing gait, covering the first mile in 6 minutes and 10 seconds, while the diminutive Weston brought up the rear in 10 minutes and 43 seconds. The distinctive styles of each contestant were well-known and appreciated by the knowledgeable crowd. After twenty-four hours of walking and running, Rowell had covered 127 miles and had won a \$200 bonus, a solid silver card case lined with gold, and a silver plate bearing his name. All the major contestants except Weston had beaten 100 miles that day.

On Tuesday, Rowell, Hazael, Guyon and Ennis continued a pitched battle for the lead. Hazael, thirty-five years old, round-shouldered and powerfully built, ran with the "long lope of a deer." Rowell, the other tough-muscle Englishman, ran with a methodical jog-trot that never seemed to tire him. Guyon was by far the most graceful in his walking and running, but soon found himself 7½ miles behind the leader, Charles Rowell. Frank Hart walked in the image of his teacher, O'Leary, and was doing well. Rowell's inexorable pace resulted in a record 176 miles in 36 hours. At 48 hours, the score stood at Rowell, 215 miles; Guyon, 200; Merritt, 197; Hart, 194; Hazael, 185; Ennis, 180; Weston, 173; and Krohne, 160.

Nearly nine thousand tickets were sold on Wednesday, the third day. Rowell still led with 310 miles while a four-way battle for second place saw Merritt, Hazael, Hart and Guyon some thirty miles back. Weston was in sixth place and incurred the wrath of many fans and the press with his cane-swinging, carefree air, "absurd antics and idiotic grimaces." His retirement of eight hours from the track disgusted those who had backed him "for a walking rather than a sleeping match," and the betting odds against him rose to 50-1. It was later discovered that Weston had been ill throughout the entire match but chose not to quit or

¹⁵ *The New York Tribune* sports pages from September 23, 1879 through September 28, 1879 were dominated by detailed accounts of this memorable fifth contest. See also *The Daily Inter-Ocean*, Chicago, September 29, 1879, p. 3; *The New York Sportsman*, October 4, 1879, p. 164.

reveal his condition. The crowd favorite, Frank Hart, kept close and received a wreath of flowers bearing the motto, "Go it, Black Dan."

On Thursday, ten men remained on the track. Excitement was high and thousands of dollars were bet on who would take second place. Bulletins of the runners' progress were posted "from the Harlem Bridge to the Battery." Six thousand paid customers were on hand that night plus 300 street urchins who had gained entrance to the Garden through a narrow coal hole on 27th Street. Even bets were made that Weston's record would stand. The *Tribune* reporter stated that "\$225,000 covered all the books in the betting up to 8 P.M." By 1 A.M. Friday morning, the score read Rowell, 402 miles; Hazel, 368; Merritt, 367; Guyon, 345; Hart, 339; and Weston, 322.

A major crisis occurred late Friday morning. Rowell had failed to emerge from his tent following one of his infrequent and always brief rest periods. The crowd, especially the bookmakers, waited anxiously. Finally, after six hours, he emerged, shaken, ill, and in convulsions. The brave Englishman immediately set out in pursuit of Merritt, who had closed the gap to 8½ miles. At 8.58 P.M., Merritt broke into a fast run. Rowell, shaken as he was, accepted the challenge and followed close on his heels. The crowd loved it and a "perfect storm of cheers followed them around the track." They continued this way into the night, with the ever-present metallic ring of the bookmaker's voice hawking his wares. The crowd around the betting table was dense. At one o'clock in the morning of the last day, over 6,000 enthusiasts remained in the stands. Rowell now led Merritt 452 to 442, while Hazael, Guyon, Hart, and, surprisingly, Weston, had all totaled more than 400 miles.

The last day of the match, Saturday, September 27, 1879, saw nine men on the track. Federmeyer had quit, complaining that the tempo was "more for hares than turtles." All morning the silent shuffling continued. Rowell reached his 500th mile at 1:02 P.M., amidst cheers and "God Save the Queen" from the band. The doughty Rowell sprinted a lap in acknowledgement. A storm of applause greeted Merritt at 4:10 P.M. as he finished his 500th mile. At 8 P.M. the Garden was packed with the largest audience of the match. Hazael scored 500 miles at 8.03 P.M. The crowd became unruly and many slipped under the guard rails and onto the narrow track. Spectators elbowed past the police in an effort to see the finish. The protracted torment finally ended at 9:48 P.M., some 140 hours after the start. Trainers and physicians escorted the nine men to their hotels for treatment. Rowell was the winner again with 530 miles. Merritt had completed 515 miles and Hazael an even 500. Frank Hart, the Boston favorite, managed 482 and Guyon 471, Weston 455, both Ennis and Krohne 450, and Taylor an undistinguished 250 miles. Nearly \$56,000 was divided among them with Rowell receiving \$30,000 for his week's work.¹⁶

Decline of Pedestrianism

The inherent ills of professional sport are greed, callousness, and an insatiable tendency toward blatant and often brutalized gladiatorial display. Without a regulator, professional sport contains the seeds of its own destruction. Professional pedestrianism in the United States was guilty of these abuses and slowly began to ebb in popularity after the intriguing series of five matches sponsored by Sir

¹⁶ Fifth contest for the Astley belt, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, October 4, 1879, pp. 71-72.

John Astley. Six-day foot racing did not give in to the flashier and faster six-day bicycle racing for several years and not without a struggle. During the declining years of the sport, with vicious exploitation of the athletes by promoters and gamblers plus the athlete's self-realization of his own vast physical potential, the public saw some marvelous performances. Inevitably, the world's record fell time and again.

In February of 1880, "Blower" Brown covered 553 miles and broke Weston's record. In New York City, from April 5-10, 1880, Frank Hart ran 566 miles. Rowell also did 566 miles in London that same year. Over the Christmas holiday in 1881, Patrick Fitzgerald upped the "go-as-you-please" record and the Madison Square Garden record to a prodigious 582 miles. On March 3, 1882, in New York, George Hazael of England became the first human to officially run 600 miles in six days and six nights. In that same race, his countryman Charles Rowell totaled a staggering 150 miles in the first twenty-four hours, a world record. In May 1884, Fitzgerald defeated Rowell 612 miles to 602 miles in a memorable race witnessed by 12,000 New Yorkers. On February 9, 1888, James Albert, alias "Cathcart," a Philadelphia alderman, logged his 621st mile and another record. Finally, the fastest six-day marathoner of them all, a tiny Englishman named George Littlewood, astonished the sports world and a knowledgeable New York audience with a performance of 623¾ miles in 139 hours and 59 minutes, a record unapproached to the present day.¹⁷

The sport died, but many of the runners continued their mesmeric tread on to the end of the century and well into the next. Weston had walked nearly 5,000 miles in 100 days in 1884.¹⁸ He and his old rival Daniel O'Leary staged a comeback in 1896 by walking 2,500 miles across America in nine weeks. Charles Rowell completed a full 26-mile marathon in 3 hours and 4 minutes on March 26, 1909. John Ennis continued to walk till the eve of World War I. In 1909, the 71-year-old Edward Payson Weston made the headlines again by walking 3,895 miles from New York City to San Francisco in 104 days.¹⁹ In 1913, on the fiftieth anniversary of his famous walk from Maine to Washington, D.C. (to attend Lincoln's inauguration), Weston duplicated the feat and astonished the accompanying doctors. Always the showmen, the six-day pedestrians of the nineteenth century represent a breed of men and a sport that is not likely ever to be seen again.

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¹⁷ Statistical details of all these record performances may be found in James I. Lupton's *The pedestrian's record* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1890).

¹⁸ Weston's temperance tours, *The Times* (London) March 17, 1884, p. 10, and April 3, 1884, p. 6.

¹⁹ The *New York Times* carried extensive and daily columns in Weston's own words, beginning on March 16, 1909 and ending July 14, 1909.