

## WOMEN BEHAVING MADLY

*The intrepid feats of the redoubtable women walkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century captured the imagination of public and press alike. But it was not only their feats that caught the attention; their fashions became a talking point as well. British Athletics Historian **Peter Lovesey** tells the story of the genesis of women's athletics in this wonderful article which Jill Green has passed onto me.*

They were the trailblazers of women's athletics, doughty characters who created a sensation for daring to appear before the public. From 1816 onwards, when Mary Frith, a mother of six, set out on a 500-mile walk at Maidstone, there were occasional press reports of 'female pedestrians', their successes and failures. The youngest I have heard of was a child of seven, the oldest eighty-five. They battled with the staid conventions of their time and deserve their place in the history of the sport.

The seven-year old was Ernna Matilda Freeman, from Strood. Through the summer of 1823 she regularly completed thirty-mile walks in Kent and London, usually around a quarter-mile grass circuit for wagers of up to £100, presumably made by her father. Her best reported time was 7 hours 49 minutes, at Chelsea, fortified with a little wine and water, and not a word from the press about exploitation.

We can be confident that Mary Kelynack was not pressured into walking by a grasping parent. She was an 85-year-old fishwife from Newlyn, Cornwall, who decided in 1851 to visit the Great Exhibition. The story was that she was used to walking into Truro and reckoned London couldn't be much further up the road. It took her five weeks to cover the 270 miles. Like many of these long walks, hers had a cumulative effect in the press and towards the end of her journey hundreds lined the roadside. Queen Victoria asked to meet Mary and generously called her 'the most famous woman in England'. About a week later, after her few days as a celebrity old Mary walked all the way home.

In the same year of 1851 a development in fashion created new possibilities for women walkers. Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, of New York, visited England and promoted her controversial costume of coatee or bodice, short skirt and, under it, pantaloons or 'bloomers' reaching to the ankles; hardly sportswear but a huge advance on the crinoline.

'Pedestriennes' from America like Miss Cushman and Kate Irvine visited England and sported the new costume in 500-mile track walks that emboldened English women to do better. The supreme challenge was to cover 1000 miles in 1000 successive hours, one mile each hour, first achieved by a Scotsman, Captain Robert Barclay, in 1809. It meant six weeks of walking, day and night, in all weathers. Mrs. Dunn, a Lancashire woman of 31, made the attempt in July, 1854, at Rock Ferry, Birkenhead, wearing a short bluejacket, pink trousers and straw hat and became known as the Bloomer pedestrian. Whether she matched Captain Barclay is not certain but later that year she certainly walked 1000 half miles in 1000 successive half-hours.

In 1864, the sleep denying 'Barclay feat' was attempted in a London music hall. An Australian, Margaret Douglas, had a gallant failure, watched by many, including the diarist, A J. Munby: 'A stout, sturdy little woman of 43; drest in a wideawake, a loose white shirt a red kilt with a pair of knickerbockers, breeches underneath, and red stockings; no petticoats. Round and round she went, like a wild animal in a vast cage, walking about 4 miles an hour, taking no notice of anyone.'

A Yorkshire woman, Mrs. Emma Sharp, read in the papers about the Australian and remarked to her husband, John, an iron-worker, 'Wah, I could do that mysen. Yes, I can do it and what's more I will.' Brushing aside her husband's protests, she set off in September 1864, in the sports ground attached to the Quarry Gap Hotel, Laisterdyke, near Bradford, walking back and forth along a 120-yard stretch. Daringly dressed in men's clothes, down to white waistcoat and laced boots. She was soon attracting interest. As the weeks went by public curiosity grew phenomenally and upwards of 100,000 paid to watch her and bet on whether she would make it. She took to carrying a pistol in each hand to deter anyone from jostling her, or administering chloroform. Before dawn on October 29, 1864, a crowd of 25,000 converged on the village to witness the 5:15 am. finish. A man with a loaded musket walked ahead of Emma, for it was feared that even at this late stage someone who had bet on her failing would attempt to stop her. Serenaded by the local brass band, she completed her task in style, showing no distress, though for some days after, she slept almost continuously.

The sport underwent significant changes in America in the 1870s. Solo walking outdoors gave way to indoor matches against other competitors, sometimes men. At first the women received generous handicaps. Then Mary Marshall, the best of them, took on Peter Van Ness in 1876 and beat him in two 20-mile walks out of three.

Meanwhile, an English walker, Ada Anderson, was demonstrating remarkable endurance. In 1876 she

walked the obligatory 1000 miles in 1000 hours. At a Kings Lynn music hall, in July, 1878 she topped the Barclay feat by walking a mile and half every hour for 672 hours, logging 1008 miles. Announcing herself as the champion walker of the world, she travelled to New York at the end of 1878 and reeled off 2700 quarter miles in 2700 quarter hours at the Mozart Hall.

Boring it was not, apparently, for not only did the redoubtable Ada reveal shapely and superbly developed limbs that were visible to the knee; she had trained as a music hall performer and liked to sing and play the piano in her rest intervals. If someone in the audience fell asleep, Ada was given a tin horn to blast in his ear. Huge crowds paid to see the fun. She earned \$8,000 in Brooklyn, and then took the show to Chicago for \$15,000.



**On the walkway at Mozart Hall in Brooklyn, Ada Anderson's form is inspected by the boulevardiers – including gamblers and bookies**

Ada Anderson's walks lit a fuse in America. There was money to be made in the sport and scores of solo events and races were arranged. It coincided with a craze for six-day walks that spread to Canada, Britain and even Australia. Ada cheerfully joined in and always lasted the course but never won. The new star was a slight, sixteen-year old vaudeville performer, who proved unbeatable and steadily raised the record for six-day walking to 409 miles in May, 1880, at San Francisco. Sadly Amy Howard died in childbirth in October 1885. Her record survived much longer, it was finally beaten over a century later in 1984.

Inevitably, there were those who condemned women's walking as lewd or demeaning, and the organisers were compelled to insist on higher standard of dress and decorum. Unfortunately decorum doesn't sell tickets and by the mid 1880s public interest had dwindled. It might be argued that the professional walkers had little influence on the evolution of women's track and field. However, they compelled the opinion-makers in the press to take a view on the desirability of women competing, and not all of the reaction was negative. Ada Anderson and her rivals had opened the door a fraction and a chink of light showed through.