

ALBERT (BERT) COUZENS: 1899 - 1973

Phil Essam recently pointed me to a few small newspaper snippets about an English walker named Bert Couzens. These short articles intrigued me so I decided to delve further into the life of this remarkable man and I am able to present a rather episodic discussion of some of his many feats.

Albert (Bert) Couzens was born in 1899. Like his father before him, who was Queen Victoria's favorite walker, he was attracted to the life of the long distance walker, long after the heady days of professional pedestrianism had passed. But this did not stop him from becoming a legend in his own right. He started his career at an early age. At eleven, he strolled from London to Colchester (about 50 miles); three years later he was fired from his chemist's apprentice job for walking off one day to see friends at Walton-on-the-Naze (about 70 miles).

He was employed for most of his life by Henley's of Barking and was obviously one-track-minded, explaining his non-married status very simply: "*Women and athletics don't mix.*"

On November 16, 1935, Couzens completed 160 miles of non-stop walking in 32 hours to break the world record. This great feat has been captured in the following photo (<http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/9535.news-comment.news-politics.sport-picture-past-1935>)



In 1937, he walked from York to Fleet Street in London, a distance of 200 miles, in 38 hours, carrying a letter of good will from his commandant to the commandant of the Royal Observer Corps in London. He later reduced his record time for this walk to 36 hr. 55 min.

Also in 1937, he walked 408 miles from Edinburgh to London in 94 hours (just under 4 days). He subsequently improved his record to 84 hours 50 minutes (3½ days). On this second occasion, a newspaper clipping advises that

During the whole walk he had only 100 minutes rest, had no sleep, ate only two slices of toast, drank 32 cups of tea, and smoked 62 cigarettes. While on the road, he was paced by three cyclists.

But he is best remembered for his most famous feat when in 1946/1947, he walked nearly 3000 miles in 1000 hours. He started out initially on September 30th 1946, just to beat Captain Barclay's famous feat of 1000 miles in 1000 hours and beat it he did, in grand style, recording a distance of 2,652 miles in the required timeframe! The venue was Romford Stadium, a greyhound track, with some 5 laps to the mile.

Within 2 weeks (335 hours in fact), he had already covered the requisite 1,000 miles. A newspaper report commented

Bert ambled along at a casual gait until he had walked an even 1,000 miles. He rested as little as possible, slept in a little hut off the track, ate crab sandwiches and tea, went wandering off his beaten path occasionally, once to see himself in a newsreel. He smashed to bits a 137-year-old world's record of 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours; his time was only one-third that.

Another article commented further

Now he is continuing in order to finish the other 665 hours to see how many miles he has logged by that time.

Couzens has worn out two pairs of rubber shoes. He drinks buckets of tea, smokes 40 cigarettes a day and lives on tablets and a few sandwiches, but no meat. Since the beginning of his marathon walk on September 30, he has had only 4 hours sleep. He usually lies down for half an hour and sleeps for 15 minutes.

There are a number of photos from this walk and one is shown below.



Couzens takes a cup of tea during his 3000 mile walk (<http://www.life.com/image/50504798>)

For other photos from the walk, check out <http://www.life.com/image/50504796> , <http://www.life.com/image/50504797> and <http://www.life.com/image/50504799>

By the time the 1,000 hours had been reached in early November, he had completed an incredible 2,653 miles. Still not content, he then announced he would continue on to the 3,000 mile marker which he duly did – the total time recorded at 1,136 hours. The papers reported it as

a physical endurance record that may never be surpassed. He covered the last mile of his walk in 12 minutes. Couzens then went home for his first night's sleep for seven weeks. He has walked for some part of every hour during that period. His plans for yesterday were digging over the garden and going for a walk.

The finish of this walk was captured by newsreel footage – see <http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=26845>. The film shows Couzens taking the last few steps of his marathon 3,000 mile walk, being congratulated by the Mayor of West Ham, inspecting his 6 pairs of worn-out shoes, then being raised by the crowd and carried away from the stadium.

When the newsreel was shown at the Coronation cinema in Manor Park on the following Friday evening and Saturday afternoon, patrons had an opportunity to express appreciation of this remarkable feat when Bert appeared on the stage. He was given a big welcome and feted by the Mayor of East Ham, Alderman C. W. Dixon and a copy of the newsreel was then presented to him as a keepsake.

The newspaper report of this feat commented that “*Soon he intends to walk to Southampton, get on a liner bound for New York, walk round the deck while crossing the Atlantic, and then walk from New York to San Francisco.*” It is not known if this eventuated.

A year later, he was back in the news when, on March 8th 1947, he completed a 3,000 mile walk around Britain, finishing at Croydon. His time was 47 days 8 hours. The article stated that “*during the freeze, Couzens walked at times along an 18 inch path between 20 foot walls of snow.*”

He also walked the length of the British Isles from Lands End to John O'Groats, a distance of some 900 miles. On another occasion he did a sponsored charity walk of several laps round West Ham Football Ground accompanied by Kid ? a famous boxer of the time.

Interestingly, for someone so gifted, he never qualified as a Centurion, perhaps because of the high wall erected between amateur and professional walking in those days. Bert died in Barking in 1973, at 74 years of age. But his feats live on

after him and his superhuman feats of endurance walking continue to inspire us.

Tim Erickson
Wednesday 25 August 2010