

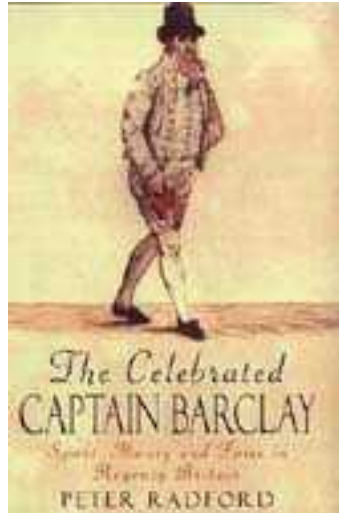
THE CELEBRATED CAPTAIN BARCLAY: SPORT, MONEY AND FAME IN REGENCY BRITAIN

Fred Brooks pointed me to a website advertising a very exciting new book on the life of Captain Robert Barclay, that most famous of English ultradistance walkers. I bought the book and thoroughly enjoyed the read. The website was http://www.ultramarathonworld.com/uw_archive/n26se01a.html and the book details are as follow:

The Celebrated Captain Barclay: Sport, Money And Fame In Regency Britain

Author: Peter Radford.

Published by Headline Book Publishing Ltd at £15.99.



The website published the following extract to whet our appetites and I reproduce it here. If you can get a copy of the book, I recommend it.

London - It was the afternoon of Wednesday 12 July and by now the crowds on Newmarket Heath had grown so vast that most of the men, women and children had very little possibility of seeing the action. It was hot with the midsummer sun beating down as more people arrived, drawn by weeks of almost incessant media coverage in The London Chronicle, The St James's Chronicle and The Times.

Already by the previous Monday the numbers had grown so dangerously large that workmen were called in to rope off the area to keep it clear and avoid any potentially disastrous interruptions. Nevertheless, among the general hubbub, the noise of the enthusiastic spectators and the smells of the food stalls, the mood was of excitement and satisfaction. Just being there was enough. Just being able to tell your children and your grandchildren that you had been there and been part of it. Part of the greatest human feat ever attempted. That was enough.

It was the summer of 1809, and the horses alone had never attracted such crowds to Newmarket. They had come to see one man. One man who had wagered that he could walk one mile every hour of every day and every night - without a break - Sundays included, for 1,000 hours. That is just nine hours short of six weeks. His name was Captain Robert Barclay.

But it was not only the extraordinary challenge of endurance that attracted national attention it was the size of the bet. Barclay's original wager was for 1,000 guineas against James Wedderburn-Webster, but with side bets it was rumoured that it was worth 16,000 guineas if he succeeded. At the time a farm labourer or artisan earned on average about a guinea a week; 50 guineas, as a year's wages, was the yardstick that most people who made up his audience would have as a measure of Barclay's potential winnings.

Huge amount

So, for the majority of the crowd, Barclay had originally wagered more than 20 years' income, but now stood to take home the equivalent of 320 years' income. It was impossible to comprehend. To add to all this, another of the rumours that reached the crowd, and was repeated by The Times two days later, was that the gentlemen who had bet on this event had between them wagered 100,000 pounds, or 40 million pounds today. The Prince of Wales was one of them.

Nor was it only about money. This was an athletic event that challenged the very limit of human capability. Many thought it impossible, and we should not imagine that they were all poor judges of physical ability. In Georgian Britain, before the internal combustion engine or electricity, more people lived by the sweat of their brow and travelled by the strength and spring in their legs than has ever been the case since. Most knew more about what a man could achieve in a day on his own two feet than we could possibly know today. The accepted wisdom when Barclay began was that this feat was impossible, or dangerously close to impossible. Everyone

present knew of the potential fatal consequences of pushing the body beyond its natural limits. And the risk was part of the attraction.

'A thousand miles in a 1,000 hours for 1,000 guineas' was a phrase that had been on everyone's lips even before 1 June, nearly six weeks earlier, when Barclay began. The 1,000 hours would be up at 4pm and at 2.30pm he had already completed 998 of them. He had two left, one for the hour leading up to three o'clock and another for the hour leading up to four o'clock. Everyone now was fairly certain that nothing could go wrong.

The crowd was made up of all ages and social backgrounds, and they had come for a variety of reasons. There were local farmers and their wives and sturdy children, the sporting gentlemen of the Fancy, the riffraff who always hung around the edges, and numerous gentlemen and ladies who would not normally be seen dead at a sporting event.

Throughout the whole of June and the first half of July, fashionable ladies and gentlemen arranged to be driven out to see Barclay complete his hourly mile, day and night, and they shared the turf with farmers, kitchen maids, grooms, tin kers and pickpockets. They took in the hustle and bustle of the two rival groups who, with their supporters, recorders and assistants, had established two tented camps at opposite ends of the half-mile course to accommodate them and to provide hospitality to themselves and their friends.

Daily reports

Egged on by daily reports in all the newspapers, men and women came first in their hundreds and then in their thousands, to be at an event that became not merely a sporting occasion but a major social one. They picnicked, ran races among themselves and cheered every time Barclay appeared. They took care to keep out of the way of the gentlemen of the Fancy, the fanatics who supported all the sporting events, and who, between them, had risked so much money on this one.

In July 1809 there was a carnival atmosphere on Newmarket Heath and most of Britain wanted to be part of it. During the last few nights those who had made their way there had taken every available bed in Newmarket, Cambridge or any other town or village in the vicinity. Not a horse or vehicle of any description was to be had anywhere. Everyone told themselves, and with some justification, that there had never been an occasion like this before.

Just before 2.30pm there was a buzz among those nearest to the Horse and Jockey Inn as Barclay stepped out into the sun surrounded by a posse of supporters. He was just six weeks away from his thirtieth birthday, and stood an inch under 6ft. He had a slightly receding hairline and his face looked drawn from six weeks of minimal, broken sleep and incessant physical effort, but many of the women present may well have described him as 'handsome'. He had lost so much weight over the past six weeks that his blue-flannel breeches hung loose on him.

Lambswool stockings and strong shoes completed the ensemble. In all his previous sporting exploits people had always commented on his strong, imposing physical presence, and on his muscular, well-formed arms and shoulders. Boxers were built like Barclay, not long-distance endurance athletes. He had been in great pain and had lost a lot of weight, and his efforts had come close to breaking him. Nevertheless, he had taken the bandage off his right leg and seemed to be in less pain than the previous day. His body may have shrunk over the past few weeks, but his spirit and determination seemed to have been magnified to make up the difference.

William Cross

His man, William Cross, now gave the final check to the captain's shoes. The watches were scrutinised for the umpteenth time, and over the line stepped Barclay to begin his 999th and penultimate mile. What the crowd also knew about him, but was not immediately apparent that day, was that Barclay was a 'gentleman', with the blood of ancient Scottish kings pulsing through his veins.

Robert Barclay was already emotionally and physically committed to being a 'serious' athlete when he was still at school and in his teens. The first real evidence of this came in August 1796, the month of his seventeenth birthday when he took on his first sporting wager. His school was in Brixton, a rural village four miles to the south of London. Barclay had already developed a dislike of being confined indoors for too long, and preferred to be 'out in the air'. The Barclay family were aware of the dangers of exposing him, a 13-year-old boy, to Brixton and the 'vices of the capital'. Even in Brixton there was no escaping the fact that this was the golden age of gambling when the whole country seemed to lose its head, and frequently its shirt, in the dizzy whirl of speculation.

Barclay's first wager was that he could walk six miles, 'fair toe and heel', on the Brixton-to-Croydon road inside an hour. On every stride, the heel of the front foot must strike the ground before the toe of the rear foot left it. This was a genuine test of athletic ability and discipline. If the walker were unfit, out of practice or unknown as a pedestrian, as Robert was, a betting man would offer 6-4 against the task being successfully completed. On the day, however, Barclay completed the task successfully, showing that he was an accomplished athlete and not an inexperienced, delicate, pampered young gentleman.

Robert was already well known for being unusually active and athletic, so it would not have come as a surprise that he was so competent, but what was surprising was the size of the wager - 100 guineas - and that his father agreed to it. Robert learned from an early age that there were big financial rewards for those who were fit and active. Many of the forces that had shaped Robert's life so far had encouraged his athleticism. First among these

was his father. Robert Barclay senior was a much-respected Scottish laird who had liked the sensation of hard physical labour, and although he was 48 years old when Robert was born, still liked rolling up his sleeves and feeling the trickle of sweat down his back. On several occasions he had walked from Ury to London, a journey of 510 miles, which he once did in 10 days. Nor was he only a walker. He once wrestled a notorious Highland soldier, and twice heaved a trespassing tinker's donkey over a hedge. No wonder he became known as 'The Great Master of Ury'.

Born 25 Aug. 1779

Robert Barclay was born at Ury on 25 August 1779, the summer in which the Derby and the Oaks were first run. His mother, Sarah Ann, was 22 and she was her husband's second wife. After she had given him eight children, Sarah Ann and the Great Master were divorced in 1793. By then they were 36 and 62 respectively and Robert was 14.

The society in the east of Scotland in which they grew up was strongly influenced by their history and traditions. Men were impressed by feats of strength and endurance, and told stories about them to their sons, just as their fathers had told them. The practice of challenging each other to wrestle, or to see who could lift heavy stones, or throw a weight or a blacksmith's hammer the greatest distance, was probably centuries old. For generations such feats were regarded as trials of manhood and a question of honour and prestige, rather than merely sporting activities. It was a culture that produced proud, hard and competitive men. Not all the influences were Scottish or local.

In 1788, when Robert was eight, his father became a Westminster MP and was re-elected at the general elections of 1790 and 1796. When he came home there were stories to tell. The most colourful tales to a young boy's ears were of the encounters between the most famous athletes of the day. There was the flamboyant, yet 'highly scientific' Jewish boxer, Daniel Mendoza, and his adversaries, Richard Humphries and John Jackson.

The latter were famed for having the manners of 'gentlemen'. Even the foot-racers and pedestrians attracted increasing attention and were cast by the newspapers in an heroic mould. Foster Powell was first among these. A thin, mild Yorkshireman with strong legs, he had once walked the 400 miles from London to York and back in well under six days.

Thousands lined the roads just to watch this unassuming man pass. In the craze for gambling, the old and the young, the fat and the thin, the rich and the poor, men and women, all raced for money on the roads of Britain or on courses marked out on the downs, heaths and parks or on a horse-race course. At one extreme, in the autumn of 1789, Donald MacLeod walked from Inverness to London, a distance of 560 miles, turned round and walked all the way back, and then on arriving at Inverness turned round again and walked back to London - a total of 1,680 miles. Not a bad performance, particularly as MacLeod was reported to be 100 years old at the time.

18 months old

At the other end of the age scale, an 18-month-old girl 'ran' about half a mile down the length of The Mall in London in 23 minutes for a wager. Not one she made herself, presumably. Thousands watched. This was an age of extremes. It is even possible that Barclay saw one of these events when he was a boy of eight. In 1787 he was sent to his first school at Richmond in Yorkshire, and stayed there four years. At this time Richmond was one of the fashionable centres for horse-racing, and the racecourse was also used for other sporting events.

In the late summer of 1788 a gruelling pedestrian wager took place there. John Batty, a poor, local pig driver in his mid-50s walked 700 miles in 14 days. He attracted a huge number of inquisitive locals on the way boys from the local school must, surely, have been among them. Those who were there had an object lesson in single-mindedness for he had to suffer 13 days of acute discomfort, having 'lost the skin off his feet' after the first day because of new shoes.

Although sport was increasingly a great social melting pot, and people of all classes, ages and backgrounds rubbed shoulders at the big events, it was not at all usual for them to face each other in direct competition. The social gulf was still too wide to be bridged easily. This is the world that shaped Robert Barclay, a world in which trials of strength and stamina, and stories about them, were woven into daily life. A world mad on sport and, at all levels, entranced by the excitement of gambling.

The course that Barclay was following had been measured out from his rented accommodation near the Horse and Jockey. It went across the Norwich Road and in a straight line across the heath to a post half a mile away. It was beautifully smooth and even. Every hour he walked over the course, up to and around the post and back. Now they watched him make his way out to the post and back with stiff, aching and tired strides in 22 minutes. Everyone in the crowd started chattering and calculating.

999th mile

Barclay's recorder wrote down the time, 2.52pm, which meant that he had completed his 999th mile eight minutes inside the deadline. James Wedderburn-Webster's recorder did the same. All Barclay had to do was wait the eight minutes until the 1,000th hour began and he could set out on the final leg of his 1,000-mile epic.

The immense organisation of this unprecedented sporting event had begun secretly nine months previously when Barclay arranged a clandestine trial at Ury, his estate in Scotland, for George Mollison, one of his tenant farmers

and loyal family friend, to go on foot one mile every hour for eight days. Mollison was a rugged 54-year-old who stood 6ft 3in tall and was well built, and after eight days he reported that he could go on for six months. Barclay knew that he couldn't, and that the chronic effects of physical fatigue and broken sleep would be cumulative and progressive, but he learned a lot about the problems that would be encountered regarding eating, sleeping, safety, lighting, and so much more. Within the 1,000-mile wager were 1,000 deadlines to be met, 1,000 trip wires to be negotiated, and there would be untold number of opponents wishing him to fail, and in some cases plotting too. With so much money at stake the event had not always been 'gentlemanly'. Barclay knew that in an all-night event such as this, the course would have to be illuminated, and so he had seven gas lamps erected about 100 yards apart and set up on poles on either side of the course, like street lamp-posts. Newmarket Heath had never before been lit. Even in fashionable London, streets lit with gas lamps were very new. They worked, too at least they worked as lamps, but not as a guarantee of trouble-free, night-time walking. Some of the lamps were broken, either by musket shots, or by shadowy figures in the night, who hurled stones at them to break the glass and so give them the cover of darkness they needed for their planned nefarious deeds.

Bodyguard John Gully

To ensure his own safety Barclay arranged for Big John Gully, ex-champion of the Prize Ring, to act as bodyguard and accompany him at night. He also resorted to carrying, in a belt around his waist, a brace of pistols.

Three o'clock arrived and passed and Barclay showed no eagerness to set off for his final hour. It was time to savour the moment and to look back affectionately at the many incidents, which at the time seemed so close to a major crisis, but now just added piquancy to his imminent success. In the fourth week, when William Cross took Barclay to the starting line to begin his 607th mile, it was obvious that he was asleep, despite the fact that he was standing up. Cross had to resort to violently beating his master around the shoulders with a stick.

This not only did the trick, it also unleashed an unprecedented deluge of curses and abuse from the captain. But the wager was saved. Cross was one of the few men who could have survived treating Barclay in such a way, but then he was no ordinary man. He was small, tough and gnarled like a plank of old weathered oak and his manners were more like those of a groom responsible for the horses, than those of a conventional manservant, but Barclay could never have found a more loyal, more vigilant or more caring attendant. Strained ligaments in his right knee began to give the captain serious trouble in week three, and he developed toothache in week four. Torrential rain soaked him and his greatcoat in weeks two, four and five, making it almost too heavy to wear.

Typical of an English summer, this gave way to choking clouds of dust when the weather turned hot in weeks one and four. Strangers and friends alike had rallied round, local families providing him with home-brewed ale, Aunt Gurney knitting him 'easy slippers', while his youngest brother, David, Dick Gurney and others went to Newmarket to help in whatever they could. Perhaps the most satisfaction was felt from the success of his scheme to walk one mile towards the end of one hour and then to pause briefly and walk the next mile at the start of the new hour, thus walking two miles back-to-back and increasing his rest time.

Hindsight

Hindsight now put some of the newspapers' exaggerated ill-informed or alarmist stories into perspective. The Edinburgh Advertiser reported in the fifth week that his hopes of succeeding were 'more feeble' and that he had 'great doubts' about himself. Even earlier, The London Chronicle had reported that all the experts believed the task impossible and confidently reported 'he will never accomplish it'. All those seeing him at three o'clock in the mornings, when he seemed to go into a black slump and dragged one foot agonisingly past the other, would have been convinced, nevertheless, that the newspapers had it right. But the days always brought relief and now, it all seemed so easy.

It is not hard to imagine the mood in and around James Wedderburn-Webster's tents was quite, quite different. Money was being lost, big money, and so were reputations. Webster was a small man, a well-known womaniser who, despite being married, boasted that all women were his 'lawful prize'. He was only 26 years old and friends referred to him as 'Bold Webster'. He was good with horses but perhaps less good with people, and is also remembered for once, foolishly, describing his beautiful young wife, Lady Frances, as 'very like Christ', which provoked scornful laughter from Lord Byron, to whom she had made a suggestion during a game of billiards that she was not Christ-like at all.

Later, she went on to have an affair with the Duke of Wellington, who was so enamoured with her he actually found time to write to her from the battlefield at Waterloo. Bold Webster, sadly, had less judgment than boldness and now the whole world knew that he had misjudged Barclay too. Those who had bet money on Barclay failing gathered together in small, glum groups. They had miscalculated and were paying a high price for it. They had also missed out on some good luck that at one stage looked as if it was coming their way. They knew that a huge fleet was waiting off the Kent coast to sail to Walcheran to take on Napoleon's forces and that Lord Huntly could have instructed Barclay, his aide de camp, to be at Deal too. They also knew that he hadn't.

At 3.15pm Barclay stepped out to begin the final mile. The burning heat had gone out of the sun and it was as pleasant a July day as you could ever find. The crowd was in a holiday mood and even the orange-sellers and jugglers craned their neck in expectation. Barclay pulled himself up to his full height and walked with less apparent difficulty than for days.

Relaxed and cheerful

He took his time getting to the half-mile marker, and, relaxed and cheerful, turned a few seconds after 3.26. Then amid deafening cheers he strode out and walked home. He arrived back at 3.37, a full 23 minutes inside the deadline. The wager was won - he had done it. The crowd went wild. Gully led three rousing cheers. In Newmarket the church bells rang a special peal and correspondents scribbled down every detail to send off for the following day's newspapers.

Barclay had dared to set himself one of the greatest sporting challenges ever, and backed with his own money and organisation had won in the full glare of public scrutiny and publicity. He was now rich and famous, and sport would never be quite the same again. Busy, as ever, behind the scenes William Cross had prepared a bath for the captain even before the church bells started to ring. The weary muscles relaxed in the water for just a few minutes, then he was taken out and dried with warm flannels.

By four o'clock, less than half an hour after the end of the great event, he was in bed, where he slept soundly until midnight, his first continuous night's sleep for nearly 42 days. At midnight, according to the prearranged plan, Cross woke Barclay with a light meal of water gruel, and then let him go back to sleep. It was too risky to allow an exhausted man, whose body was inured to so little rest, slip into deep, long, uninterrupted sleep.

The recovery was being managed every bit as carefully as the event itself. He slept until nine o'clock in the morning and then got up and was weighed on the Newmarket scales. He was 11 stone - exactly 32lbs less than his starting weight. He claimed, nevertheless, to have fully recovered and next morning even walked the streets of Newmarket to prove it, accepting the crowd's congratulations.

Lucky man

Despite his bravado, Robert Barclay knew that he had been on the receiving end of one huge slice of luck. Not related to the physical side of the task, that he had in many respects proved to be the easiest part, nor to his safety - he had taken good precautions and had a good team to protect him.

No, his luck lay in the fact the largest military force that Britain had ever put together to fight overseas, and of which he should have been part, was still waiting to depart for action. While Barclay walked backwards and forwards every hour across Newmarket Heath, the 40,000 men waiting at Deal marched and drilled on the open expanses of Bramham Downs. There seemed no good reason why they were still there and by hanging around they had already lost the benefit of surprise.

Week by week the political temperature rose. One week before the end of Barclay's walk Napoleon defeated the Austrians at Wagram, not far from Vienna, but lost 23,000 French soldiers in the process, either killed or wounded, with another 7,000 missing. Surely it was time for the fleet to leave? But still they waited. This gave time for Barclay to finish his wager, recover and make his way to the Kent coast.

He arrived on Tuesday morning, and throughout Tuesday and Wednesday men and supplies were rowed out almost continuously to the waiting ships. At Deal, where the main force was embarking, and at Ramsgate, 10 miles to the north, crowds gathered. including many ladies and gentlemen of fashion in their gigs and carriages, to see the spectacle and wave them off, because it was clear that their departure was imminent. Emotions ran high as military bands played, and cheer after cheer rose from the small boats as the British soldiers showed their eagerness to be at the enemy at last.

Confident and composed

As they cheered, small family groups tried to look confident and composed, but many a tear was wiped from an anxious cheek as the men rowed out of earshot. Then news arrived that shots fired on the French coast had been heard in Dover. Captain Barclay left from Ramsgate on Thursday 20 July, only eight days after his triumph at Newmarket, with his uniform hanging on him as if it was made for a man several sizes bigger. Later, as stories about him circulated, this period was reduced in the telling to five and even two days, but the facts hardly need to be exaggerated. It was remarkable enough that so soon after 1,000 hours of physical effort and broken sleep he was able to take his place in a fighting force and go off to war.

PETER RADFORD was born in Walsall in 1939. As an 18 year-old when he broke the 40 year-old British 100 yards record. He set new figures for all the British sprint events and equalled the world junior record for 100 metres (10.29) and set a new world junior record for 200m (20.5). This was also a British record which stood for 20 years. He set a world indoor record for 50m (5.5) and in 1960 brought back a bronze medal from the Olympics for the 100m and another bronze for the 4x100m relay.

In 1963 he was a member of the Great Britain team that defeated the USA in a head-to-head sprint relay and equalled the world record in doing it. After his athletic career was over Radford (right) worked and studied in the United States and Canada for 12 years before returning to Britain and taking a prominent role in the anti-doping movement. He was Professor of Sports Science at the University of Glasgow, and was also Chairman and Executive Chairman of the British Athletic Federation. He took up his current post of Professor of Sport

Sciences at Brunel University in west London in 1997. He is one of the world's leading authorities on 18th century sport and has lectured and written on various aspects of 18th century sport for the past 12 years.