

JOHN LEES: TRANS-AMERICA RECORD HOLDER

Two weeks ago ([Heel & Toe 2015/2016 Number 12](#)), I wrote about the 1975 British 50km which saw an amazing 101 finishers. This week I continue the story and focus on second placed finisher John Lees. To start off with a recap, the first 3 places read as follows

1975 British 50km, Whetstone, Leicester, 19 July

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|----|---------------|-----------------|---------|
| 1. | John Warhurst | Sheffield UH | 4:20:32 |
| 2. | John Lees | Brighton & Hove | 4:26:13 |
| 3. | Charlie Fogg | Enfield H | 4:27:44 |

While Jake Warhurst had walked his usual reliable race to win comfortably in 4:20:32, second placed John Lees, who was described in the RWR article as "the year's most improved walker", had taken silver with a PB 4:26:13.

John, who was born in Hove, Sussex in 1945, was a self confessed asthmatic weakling as a youngster. However while walking on the Downs one day he thought he would like to walk from Lands' End to John O'Groats. In 1971 he achieved that dream in 26.5 days, and discovered that his asthma had gone. Next John did the London to Brighton Walk (53 miles), coming 15th, and decided to join Brighton & Hove Athletics Club where he was befriended by Phil and Marilyn Chapman. He also knew of Bruce Tulloh, the 1969 European 5000 metres Champion, who had by then walked across the USA.

So in 1972 he flew to Los Angeles with Phil and Marilyn, took possession of a camper van, and started a regime of walking 50 miles per day across America. Starting at Los Angeles City Hall on 11 April 1972, he walked for 53 days, 12 hours and 15 minutes to New York City Hall, finishing on 3 June 1972. As far as I know, it is still the record for the fastest coast-to-coast walk across the United States. The performance was reported in depth in the Race Walking Records of that time, as a two part special. It is reproduced below.

In the spring and early summer of this year, Brighton and Hove walker John Lees walked across America in a new record time of 53 days 12 hours, 15 minutes, taking some eleven days off Bruce Tulloh's record, when he ran across in 1969. Halfway through his journey, John heard that a South African had run across in 54 days. Since John wrote this article, the Road Runners Club have informed us that there is some doubt about the validity of the South African's performance.

BIG WALK 72 - 2,891 MILES" by John Lees

That was the legend emblazoned on the rear of our V.W. Camper, my support vehicle throughout 54 memorable days. It served as a constant reminder that all I had to do was plank each foot down 45,000 times or more a day and thereby set a new record for the Trans-Continental crossing. On the front of the bus we put up the Union Jack and "GREAT BRITAIN", tangible expressions of the ever-increasing patriotism felt by Marilyn Williams, Phil Chapman (my two helpers) and myself now that we had become that very particular species, the Englishman abroad. "It's just not cricket, old boy", Phil would say in his best non-Derbyshire accent when something untoward happened whilst "Come on England" would be his usual cry upon speeding past me in the bus.

Considering that one could not walk across America without setting foot in both oceans, I set off from the Pacific at Venice Beach. Ahead of me lay America - 2,900 miles of desert, scrub, mountain, prairie, rolling countryside, scorpions, tarantulas, snakes, bears, tornados and sandstorm. A tall order but I wasn't daunted, just excited at getting underway.

With me on that first day, as he was to be at the coming weekend, was Ron Laird, suffering even then with the leg injury that was to so cruelly wreck his Olympic chances. Having studied Ron's book in L.A. I at last understood what leg lock was all about but now sagged at the knees and joked that there would be no judge in sight for 3,000 miles. Weeks later I'd recall this remark and wish passionately that it was otherwise, as a paranoid fear gripped me that people just wouldn't believe that I, an unknown club walker, was smashing to bits the much vaunted record of a European 5,000 metres champion.

To me the explanation was simple. Bruce Tulloh needed to beat 73 days and was therefore quite happy to record 64 days 21 hours 50 minutes, a time I set out to beat, though mindful that an American runner had apparently run 62 days in 1971. My schedule therefore had to be tighter than Tulloh's and I planned a 50 miles per day

average to arrive in New York in 58 days. Everything considered, I was probably the best prepared of all the idiots who had embarked on this trek. Distance walking had preoccupied me for four years, culminating in 3,400 miles training for the 981 miles Lands End - John O'Groats walk and a 175 miles per week six months programme prior to America. During this latter period I cut my social life almost completely. Training took time and in the absence of sponsorship, I had to save two-thirds of my salary to augment my life-savings. It was a sad fact that, at the very time I should have been building myself up nutritionally, I had to cut down to subsistence diet of porridge and potatoes. Mortgaging six months of my life to a single project; spending £1,500. With such an investment it would take an awful lot to make me pack it in once I'd started. Moreover, having suffered recurrent asthma since birth, a condition only abated after beginning systematically daily training, I was determined, now fit, to make a definite mark in the sporting world.

Having covered the 16 miles from the beach to L.A., City Hall, the usual starting point for these epics, I hared off in pursuit of Tulloh and such was the brilliance of Phil and Ron's route planning that I'd made up the deficit in two days though only walking an extra four miles. Basically, I was to tread in Tulloh's four million footsteps, but Phil never missed a short cut and overall must have saved me 50 miles'- a days' walk, material as it happened in getting the record. Typical would be the trek made by Phil and I across the desert north of Sacorro, N.M., while Marilyn took the bus round to the other side, whereby 45 miles of walking advanced me 60 miles along the road. Not so good was the journey through the Apache Reservation in Arizona. Any advantage in mileage disappeared in reduction of speed as we traversed the rocky terrain. We had hoped for a guide, but the only one there was, spent his Sunday afternoon getting drunk. Nearing nightfall the temperature dived to zero and clad only in vest and shorts we emerged hours later than expected to find a rather distraught Marilyn and, patrolmen on the point of forming a posse. They were worried that, if we didn't freeze to death, then we'd be savaged by the bears or mountain lions.

Natural hazards apart, a short cut would always provide a psychological uplift. Accumulations too - less than 2,000 to go, 1,000 up etc., - would give a feeling of progress and I'd always be elated at crossing a Stateline, raising my right hand and punching the air like a Wembley goalscorer. Not that I'd think too much in terms of days gone or days to go. I knew that my mind couldn't encompass all that it would take to cover 3,000 miles in 50 - 60 days and therefore I had no preconceived plans as to where I'd reach night:. Instead, I'd take each day as it came and quit when I'd banged out the necessary.

Had I been a little more thoughtful on the first day I'd have attended to my feet at the first sign of trouble. Instead, with the 'adrenalin flowing freely, I raced on regardless, only to cut up my heels quite badly. Valuable time would then be wasted at the beginning of the next ten days or so fixing anti-pressure pads to relieve most of the discomfort. Once healed, I had little further trouble with my feet although a painful swelling developed on the side of my left big toe. Unfortunately, I had neither the time nor the knowledge to treat this properly and it therefore remained a nuisance from Missouri to the finish.

My only serious injury began in New Mexico. I left the shelter of a canyon only to be blasted by a fierce cross-wind doing its all to drive me off the road. More concerned at remaining on the tarmac than walking naturally, I imposed a strain on my left shin. Miraculously, all was well the next morning but the trouble reappeared more seriously in Oklahoma, I tried my darndest not to limp since I knew this would only weaken the ankle but before long my leg was in a very sorry state, with my chief fear that the tendon would give out. Hitherto, my practice had been to slap on an elastic bandage but a week elapsed without any improvement. More in desperation than any real hope of success, I dispensed with all the bandages and relied solely on massage creams. Marilyn's hands must have done the trick for recovery came swift and complete. Preamble, all the strapping had been doing was to restrict the circulation.

Upon reaching the Texas border, I considered I'd put the worst behind me. Gone forever was the five hour storm in the Coachella Valley where the 50 miles per hour winds had whipped up the sand into my teeth, my shoes (making walking painful) and near blinded me; gone the 100 miles stretch of nothingness called California Desert, where the distant mounts stood and stared at me for hours on end without appearing to get any nearer; gone that dreadful day in New Mexico when the local food made me violently sick, cutting my day's total to a miserable 21 miles. Now wilderness would turn to farmland and towns appear with more regularity. I was bang on schedule, mind and body working in unison, knowing that the record must surely come given time.

Then came the traumatic news that John Bull had shattered the old record and done something in the low fifties

(not until Columbus, Ohio, 1,000 miles on, did we know for sure that 54 days was the figure). During preparation in LA., I'd heard that the S.A. runner had set off but I never expected such a complete annihilation of the old mark. Why had Bull pushed himself so hard? To build up an injury bank that he's then not needed to draw on or to set a time he hoped would endure for years? Prior to receiving this news I'd contended that the beauty of a trek such as this was knowing I could pace myself accordingly. But to get almost halfway believing I was a week up on the record only to find I was about 5 miles per day down on the required overage was a bit much. Anyway, I had no choice but to increase my daily target from 50 to 60 miles. One thing was certain. I didn't intend to be the second fastest man across.

In charting my position, Phil would tell me how many days and miles I was ahead of Tulloh but from Texas onwards I was no longer interested in me Devonion's progress. I had done with Tulloh-tracking; now I was bull fighting.

Hitherto I had taken short rests, stopped to give interviews, enjoyed breakfast in bed and an evening meal in a restaurant. Now all this had to change with the chief priority being to keep me walking every possible daylight minute. The daily pattern varied little with Phil always the first to stir - Marilyn would follow after, and together they'd scurry round boiling up coffee on "Bessie", our temperamental primus, washing up the previous night's dinner plates and moving things out to the bus. At some stage amidst all this activity, I'd deign to show a leg and would then seem to take an eternity making sure any injuries or blisters were comfortable. Often I'd wake to feel quite chesty and would, then take an asthma pill to make breathing easier. Not that I was ever ill, merely suffering from lack of sleep.

Mornings would normally dawn cold and clear, as cocooned like an astronaut, I'd be driven out to the start point. If possible this would be back down the road from the motel so that usually Marilyn could get some extra sleep while I made the few miles to the town. With rooms costing between £3 and £8, I was anxious that we obtain as much sleep as possible even if I never managed more than eight hours and averaged only six during the last month.

As the sun rose higher, I'd shed my anorak, bobble-cap, track suit and slopp-shirt and don polaroids and a Legionnaire sun hat. Always, I'd wear a short-sleeved vest. A suntan was all very well but I wasn't going to get sunburnt.

On the first day I averaged 5 mph which in England I'd regarded as normal for a 50 miles walk. Here, it took considerably more effort and with increasing heat and injuries, I came to accept 4 mph as all I could manage. Not that I'd abandoned the racewalking action, I just simply didn't have the strength to go any faster. This marked decrease in speed came as a real surprise and threw out all my calculations - 60 miles now meant 15 hours continuous walking and not 12 hours interspersed with 3 hours rest.

The first hour each day would be pitifully slow but I'd soon pick up, especially when Phil would depart to collect Marilyn. At such times and also when they'd leave me to go shopping, collect mail or "suss" (check) out the route ahead, they'd be away longer than I'd envisaged and I'd imagine that all manner of mishaps had befallen them or the "bus". I never worried unduly about myself. After all if I cracked up badly, that was it. What I couldn't bear was the thought of being halted by outside circumstances.

As it happened the "bus" caused us very little trouble. An excellent handyman, Phil was quite equal to the task of welding a broken exhaust and sorting out electrical trouble. More serious however was the oil leak nearing the halfway point of Luther in Oklahoma, leaving me to wonder when my next refreshment would come, and to contemplate the trail of oil spots on the road as the camper chugged away for repairs in Chandler, 18 miles distant. I needn't have worried - well before the town, Phil came back down the road in a saloon car that he'd talked out of the gager owner, "Lord Chapman, I presume", I greeted him.

Breakfast on the road would mean cornflakes and as many sandwiches as I could force down as the temperature rose. These would tend to stick in my craw and I'd favour foods that would slide down easily - yoghurts, ice cream, custard and scrambled eggs. The American reporters assumed that I must have some special foods and seemed really sad when told this wasn't the case. Finally, in Vega, Texas, Phil rewarded one who came by whilst he was mixing some potatoes and baked beans, a combination I'd not tried previously - into an orange-coloured plate, "Oh yes" said Phil, "this is his secret weapon, he eats it all the time, we call it Mash".

By now Phil was sounding like a tape recorder, repeating endlessly his well drilled patter and in the process boring Marilyn to tears. "The boy's going well today" would say the 26-year old Chapman, amusing me greatly as I was 27. "He's going to smash this record. Yes, well under 50 days. No, he's no plans to enter Munich". Marilyn too could sing my praises but reserved her best performance for New York. Our bus having been towed away, she demurely answered the judge 'What's a fire-hydrant? I don't think we have those in England" thereby causing the cancellation of a \$50 fine.

How fortunate I was in my choice of companions. Phil, enthusiasm personified, who is always taking me on the shortest route to my goal, could certainly teach Sir Alf Ramsey a few tricks. Marilyn too, though never getting used to the intense heat which reached 105F in Zanesville, Ohio, bore up wonderfully well. I was only doing what I liked doing, what I'd trained to do. After a week or so, she realised that I was suffering and the whole magnitude of the task came home to her. This really was the secret of our combination. Phil and Marilyn would give their all to keep me going. I'd be determined that their efforts should not fail.

Phil had planned to walk 20-30 miles with me each day but in the event it turned out much less than this. Not that I minded, I preferred to cut my own pace, moving through 50kms in about 7 1/2 hours. En route I would have been cheered by passing the 15 and 19 miles points, marking the two worst days of Tulloh and the 21 mile mark, my own worst day's total. Miles gone, miles to go, miles and more miles - - - really what else could I think about? I never became bored, never had the feeling that it wouldn't end but even so, I'd daily find myself wishing the hours away to that blessed moment when with night falling, I'd swing myself up into the bed with the words "so ends another great day in the history of British athletics".

Off then to another motel and a session of paperwork. No time for notes but I had to calculate my daily average mileage and just what was needed to get to the finish in time. Dog tired, sleep would come swiftly but after my footsteps would echo in my brain and I'd wake telling myself that I was in bed and not on the road. Truly, this was a twenty-four hours a day business. Switching off was impassible.

As the days wound down, some of my speed returned and with final daily totals of 65, 71 and 73 miles, I reached City Wall, New York, in an elapsed time of 53 days, 12 hours, 15 minutes, having en route entered the Atlantic at Kariton Bay to complete the coast to coast crossing. In averaging about 55 miles per day, I had dipped inside Bull's running record by half a day and knocked 13 days off the walking record. Ambition fulfilled but I had no feeling of triumph, only one of deflation.

So was the vast expenditure of money time and effort all wasted? Not at all! We had wonderful experiences in America and the satisfaction of having done it all ourselves, without the aid of promoters. Also, negatively, had I not gone, I'd have been haunted forever by my failure to respond to the challenge.

How much relevance does a long distance trek like this have to Athletics? As I see it, very little. In racing, one is only concerned with continuous movement at speed, whereas I could stop whenever necessary provided I kept up my quota. Four hundred miles a week is certainly useless as training as my 19m55s two miles in New Jersey showed. From experience, I'd say that 150 mpw is probably the watershed as to racing. It would be a really great advertisement for the sport if something akin to the Milk Race could be mounted but with family commitments, it's doubtful whether enough officials and walkers could be assembled.

The roads in America would vary enormously from quiet country lanes to super highways but my only concern was the walking surface. At times this would be quite appalling with the tarmac not extending to the shoulder of the road to which I'd be consigned by the volume of traffic and (in Missouri) by threat of arrest if I stayed over the white line. The sharp grit caused rapid wear on my shoes and the inability of the small town cobblers to slap new soles on without special machinery, meant many painful days before reaching civilization in Indiana.

Altitude, even at 9,040 feet, presented no problems to me although Phil had trouble training at speed in Quemado, New Mexico (7,000 feet). Weighing just 132 lbs and 6 feet in height, I couldn't have dropped much and, in fact, lost only 3 lbs. In general, I experienced low temperatures - "You've hit us in a real cool spell" - and the prevailing wind was west to east. The worst terrain - Pennsylvania, where I met hill after hill but by then, the end was in sight.

Where do I go from here? Certainly not off on another solo marathon for in doing so, I could not prove anything,

either to myself or to anyone else. Racing, however, with the man-to-man competition, the essence of athletics, presents a continual challenge. In the US, the most materialistic country in the world, everyone would ask "What do you get out of this?" Always I'd reply, "Nothing ", but that's not been the case. Since my return, I've been extremely gratified by the congratulations of fellow athletes and you can't receive better than that.

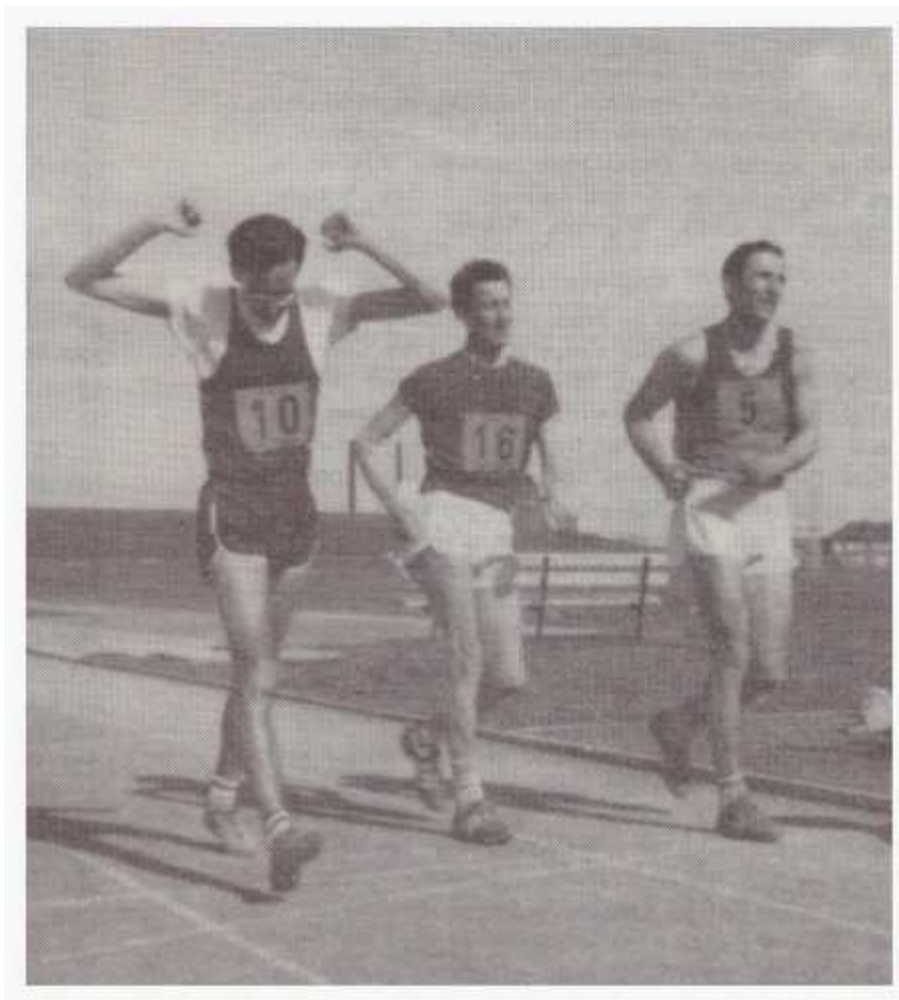
This amazing walk triggered a huge improvement in his walking, as evidenced by his performance in the **1972 Leicester-Skegness 100 Mile walk** on 28-29 July 1972. He went to an early lead and maintained it for most of the journey, only fading in the final stages, to be passed by his clubmate Dave Boxall who won with 17:58:49. John finished second in **18:15:34** to become English Centurion 488 (he was one of 18 first time centurions in that race).

In 1975, he won his first British vest, over the 50km distance. A GBR vs West Germany vs Mexico meet had been scheduled for June of that year and he was keen to make the 50km team. The official trial was on April 20th at Haringay and consisted of a 50,000m track walk. Winner Roy Thorpe, second placed John (a PB of 4:29:45) and third placed Charlie Fogg were all selected as a result of their performances.

50,000m Trial, Haringay, April 20th 1975

1. Roy Thorpe Sheffield UH 4:28:08
2. John Lees Brighton & Hove 4:29:45
3. Charlie Fogg Enfield H 4:32:19

A Banyard 4:34:14, B Ingarfield 4:37:24, J Eddershaw 4:41:14, M McCann 4:41:57, S Maidment 4:42:33, K Harding 4:43:03, R Hichel 4:45:25, C Young 4:46:36, P Markham 4:47:13, S Ashton 4:51:40, P Selby 4:52:55



John on left, lapping Colin Young and Charlie Fogg, as he finishes the track 50,000m trial (RWR 393 – June 1975)

In the international meet, which was held at Ashton Playing Fields, Woodford Bridge, Essex, on 1st June 1975, he was slightly slower, coming 9th with 4:31:46.

GBR vs West Germany vs Mexico 50,000m, Ashton Playing Fields, Woodford Bridge, Essex, 1st June 1975

1.	Gerd Weidner	GER	4:03:52
2.	Pedro Aroche	MEX	4:08:42
3.	H Schubert	GER	4:13:52
4.	Enrique Vera	MEX	4:14:54
5.	Bob Dobson	GBR	4:19:03
6.	Charlie Fogg	GBR	4:22:41
7.	Daniel Bautista	MEX	4:24:05
8.	H. Michalski	GER	4:24:32
9.	John Lees	GBR	4:31:46
10.	Roy Thorpe	GBR	4:36:56

7 weeks later came the British 50km which was mentioned at the beginning of this article. A PB of 4:26:03 saw him finish 2nd to John Warhurst, finishing off what had been a superb summer, with 3km races in 4 months.

1975 British 50km, Whetstone, Leicester, 19 July

4.	John Warhurst	Sheffield UH	4:20:32
5.	John Lees	Brighton & Hove	4:26:13
6.	Charlie Fogg	Enfield H	4:27:44

Perhaps his best racewalk came in 1977 when he finally won the **London to Brighton 53 mile** classic. He had come 3rd in 1974 with 8:41:43 but his 1977 walk was something special as John dominated from the start. Moulinet of France (winner of the 1977 Hastings-Brighton) and Ray Middleton stayed with him for about fifteen miles but then John really put on the pressure. He passed 50km in 4 hours 33 mins and increased his lead all the way to Brighton to win in the excellent time of **7:54:32**, joining the elite '8 hour' club. A truly magnificent performance!

52nd London to Brighton Walk 3rd Sep 1977

1.	John Lees	Brighton	7:54:32
2.	A. Moulinet	Paris	8:08:11
3.	Ken Harding	R.S.C.	8:19:07

Nowadays, John is a BBC Sussex sports reporter. In fact, he is the longest serving member of staff at the radio station, has a large and loyal listening audience and is known as "The Gentleman of Sport".



BBC Radio presenter John Lees