

# CAPTAIN BARCLAY

## Extraordinary Exerciser of the Nineteenth Century\*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines pedestrianism as “going or walking on foot.” A pedestrian is “one who walks as physical exercise or athletic performance.” As applied to plain prose, “pedestrian” also means commonplace, dull, uninspired.

None of these terms could be applied to Walter Thom’s prose in his monumental study entitled *Pedestrianism*, which was published in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1813. Thom, while giving a more than useful review of the sport of pedestrianism or race walking as it had evolved in Great Britain in the eighteenth century, spotlights the athlete that he feels was the greatest pedestrian of all time-- the Scotsman, Captain Barclay.

In an early chapter on pedestrianism, Thom virtually covers the wide variety of views held by doctors, trainers, athletes, coaches and laymen regarding exercise, conditioning and athletic preparation. A physician, Dr. Willich, who was an eighteenth century authority on diet and regimen, observed:

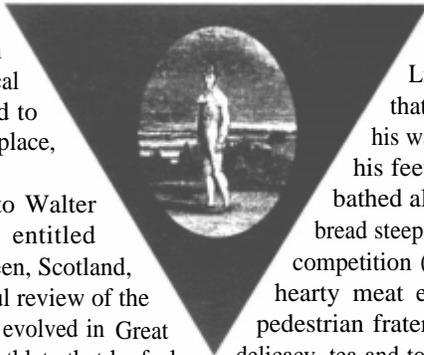
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Walking, the most salutary and natural exercise, is in the power of everybody; and we can adapt its degree and duration to the various circumstances of health. By this exercise the appetite and perspiration are promoted; the body is kept in proper temperament; the mind is enlivened, the motion of the lungs is facilitated, and the rigidity of the legs arising from too much sitting, is relieved. The most obstinate diseases, and the most troublesome hysteric and hypochondriacal complaints, have been frequently cured by perseverance in walking.<sup>1</sup>

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Pedestrianism as a sport came to the fore in the mid 1700s and was essentially a simple formula. A pedestrian would either challenge another pedestrian to walk a particular distance in a set period of time (for example, 100 miles in 24 hour) or attempt the feat alone. Backers would wager on the outcome and vast amounts of money would sometimes change hands. Frequently, to entice gamblers to put up money, pedestrians would raise their own backing and would attempt greater distances in a set period of time. For example, the greatest pedestrian of the eighteenth century, Foster Powell, in 1790 took a “bet of twenty guineas to thirteen”<sup>2</sup> that he would complete the London-York-London round trip in under live days and eighteen hours. He won the challenge but only by a margin of one hour and fifty minutes.<sup>3</sup>

Pedestrians had trainers and assistants on hand during their



competition to provide nourishment and all manner of massages and support services. A Lieutenant Fairman in a contest in 1804 wagered that he would travel 60 miles in 14 hours. During his walk he was “rubbed down with hot towels, (had) his feet soaked in warm water, and (had) his body bathed all over with spirits”.<sup>4</sup> He enjoyed “a piece of bread steeped in madeira,” shunned “animal food”<sup>5</sup> during competition (a most controversial strategy at a time when hearty meat eating was advocated by nearly all of the pedestrian fraternity), and used as a “reviver” that English delicacy, tea and toast.

Pedestrians came in all ages and sixes. There were English oaks with massive thighs and deep chests, although the majority, as one would expect, conformed to the expected athletic model—spare and strong-legged. The key, it was felt, to winning pedestrianism was “good wind”<sup>5</sup> and a “great bottom”—powerful gluteal muscles.<sup>7</sup>

Robert Barclay Allardice was born in Ury, Aberdeenshire on August 2, 1779 and at the age of 22, after schooling in England (at Richmond School and Cambridge), he began managing his father’s landholdings. Although he came to be known as Captain Barclay because of his soldiering experiences during the Napoleonic War, Thom describes Allardice as a remarkable businessman who greatly increased the rentals and land values of the family estate.

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The improvement of his extensive estates has occupied much of his attention and he is well acquainted with every thing relative to modern husbandry.<sup>8</sup>

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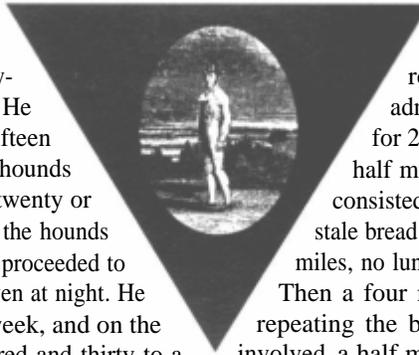
Thom makes the point that Barclay was much more than a great pedestrian. He was a superb all-round track athlete who was as strong as the proverbial ox. On one occasion in his military mess-hall Barclay had “the paymaster of the 23rd regiment, who weighed eighteen stones” (253 pounds), stand on his right hand whereupon Barclay, steadying the paymaster with his left hand, “took him up and set him on the table”.<sup>9</sup> Thom made the interesting discovery that the name Barclay is of Celtic origin and implies great strength. The literal meaning of Barclay is “Sword of Defense” and, as ancient Scottish families frequently derived their names from feats of athletic prowess and muscular derring-do, the Barclays may well have received their name from some display of heroism carried out with the sword.

Captain Barclay’s biography paints a vivid picture of a tireless, compulsive exerciser of irresistible vigor. Thom writes:

## EUROPEAN CORNER

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During the season 1810-11, he frequently went from Ury to Turriff, a distance of fifty-one miles, where he arrived to breakfast. He attended the pack (foxhunting) ... often fifteen miles from the kennel, and followed the hounds through all the windings of the chase for twenty or twenty-five miles farther. He returned with the hounds to the kennel, and after taking refreshment, proceeded to Ury, where he generally arrived before eleven at night. He performed these long journeys twice a week, and on the average, the distance was from one hundred and thirty to a hundred and fifty miles, which he accomplished in about twenty-one hours.<sup>10</sup>



beginning training the athlete had to be purged of ill vapors and foul body poisons, so regular doses of phosphate of soda were administered. Daily exercise prescriptions called for 20 to 24 miles a day, with a dawn warm-up of a half mile run followed by a six mile walk. Breakfast consisted of rare beef or mutton chops accompanied by stale bread and old beer. After breakfast six more walking miles, no lunch, and a 30 minute nap in the supine position. Then a four mile brisk walk with a four o'clock dinner repeating the breakfast diet. The warm down for the day involved a half mile dash and then a final six mile walk with "lights out" at eight.

The most unusual, indeed bizarre, training phenomenon was the process of "sweating." Once each week, the athlete, thickly muffled up in a flannel shirt and long drawers, ran four miles at breakneck pace. Immediately on returning from this run Barclay consumed a pint of "sweating liquor:"

(It is composed of the following ingredients, viz. one ounce of caraway-seed; half an ounce of coriander-seed; one ounce of root licorice; and half an ounce of sugar candy; mixed with two bottles of cider, and boiled down to one half. He is then put to bed in his flannels, and being covered with six or eight pairs of blankets, and a feather-bed, must remain in this state from twenty-five to thirty minutes, when he is taken out and rubbed perfectly dry.<sup>13</sup>

To combat boredom and training staleness, an effort was made to keep the mind and body fully occupied. Free time was seen as an opportunity for additional exercise. Cricket, bowls and quoits were recommended.

In terms of twentieth century thinking on exercise physiology, the sheer amount of daily mileage that pedestrians covered saw them doing quality training in the sense that they were replicating the actual rigors of their competition walks in their daily exercise sessions. Only in the 1960s did track runners such as New Zealander Peter Snell go to one hundred mile a week work-outs. So, in terms of conditioning the body, the amount and intensity of Barclay's early nineteenth century pedestrian training was far ahead of its time. The same, however, could not be said for his nutrition.

Vegetables were taboo for pedestrians, as was fish--"not sufficiently nutritious."<sup>14</sup> Eggs were forbidden as was milk which "curdles on the stomach."<sup>15</sup> Soups were rejected, no warm liquid was ever to be taken, and the intake of water was frowned upon.

As befits a Cambridge man, Captain Barclay was a good historian, well acquainted with the Creek and Latin classics and a fluent conversationalist. Thom, a staunch admirer of Captain Barclay, talks of the pedestrian in the most glowing terms. Barclay possessed "strict principles of honor and integrity"<sup>11</sup>, thus doubly characterizing him as a gentleman and a Briton who, although not of the aristocracy, satisfied the most important criteria for social status-acceptance and recognition. In short, Barclay came of good Scottish stock and was a member of that British oligarchy-the land owning class, whose members dominated the House of Commons and whose influence and impact steered the expansion of Queen Victoria's British Empire. Captain Barclay began his "toe and heel" (a popular phrase of the period for pedestrianism) career as a 15 year old and by the early 1800s had established a record as a great sprinter (under 56 seconds for the quarter mile) as well as a walker of renown. However, the event that catapulted Captain Barclay to the forefront of nineteenth-century sport was his announcement that at Newmarket-Heath, England on June 1, 1809 he: "... engaged to go on foot, one thousand miles in one thousand successive hours, at the rate of a mile in each and every hour..."<sup>12</sup>

As has been noted, Captain Barclay's life-style (regular one hundred plus miles of "recreational" walking per week) meant that the Scottish laird, outside of sea-bathing and fresh air at Brighton, did not have to train specifically for his "Walk of the Century". However, pedestrian training and conditioning by the start of the nineteenth century was a wondrous hodge-podge of current scientific theory, medieval dogma and occasional flavorings of common sense. The formula was well seasoned with quakery, hokum, black magic and the current craze of the day. The training regimen publicly promoted by Captain Barclay was as follows. On



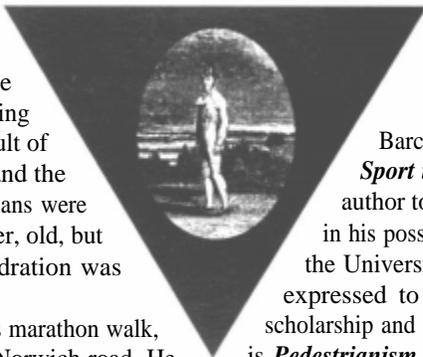
The commandment of avoiding liquids as much as possible may have had serious deleterious effects on pedestrians. Indeed, the number of accounts of pedestrians experiencing frightful cramps may have been partially a result of the notion of minimum water consumption and the prohibition of salt intake. Nevertheless, pedestrians were allowed three pints of beer (“home-brewed beer, old, but not bottled”)<sup>16</sup> a day and so complete dehydration was avoided.

On June 1, 1809 Captain Barclay began his marathon walk, out and back along a half mile stretch of the Norwich road. He sometimes walked in a flannel jacket, sometimes in a loose dark grey coat, but he always wore stout shoes and lamb-wool stockings.<sup>17</sup> He ate prodigiously as the days turned into weeks and June became July. He consumed five to six pounds of animal protein per day and kept well hydrated with numerous glasses of wine, ale, porter and cups of tea.

He walked with a lounging gait, made no apparent exertion and scarcely raised his feet more than two or three inches above the ground. Thom gives us a remarkably detailed account of Captain Barclay’s forty-two day extravaganza. At the beginning of the walk Barclay’s weight was 186 pounds, but on Wednesday, July 12, 1809. when he finished the walk, he was down to 154 pounds. Towards the end of the walk he very understandably looked fatigued and “the spasmodic afflictions in his legs were particularly distressing”.<sup>18</sup>

On June 1, Captain Barclay was favored to complete his walk with the bookmakers offering odds of “two to one, on”. By the end of June the odds had improved to five to two and at the beginning of July were ten to one on his accomplishiig the match.<sup>19</sup>

Captain Barclay won his bet, the handsome amount thousand pounds, but more than that, he earned a special niche in sports history. Perhaps no athlete in the nineteenth century so fused the best qualities of the amateur gentleman and the well-



conditioned professional athlete. Barclay died in 1854.

**Acknowledgement**

The author first became aware of Capt. Barclay in the reading of Professor Peter McIntosh’s *Sport in Society* (1963). Peter McIntosh allowed the author to make a copy of the Thom biography that was in his possession while they both were faculty members at the University of Otago in New Zealand. Warm thanks is expressed to Professor McIntosh for the quality of his scholarship and the extent of his assistance. The primary source is *Pedestrianism* by W. Thom, published by D. Chalmers and Company, Aberdeen, Scotland, 1813. Copies can be found in the Scottish National Library, Edinburg and the British Museum, London.

\* Portions of this paper were incorporated into “Athletic Training in Nineteenth Century Britain: From Fad and Quackery to Credible Exercise Science,” a paper presented at the North American Society for Sport History Conference, Clemson, May 1989.

**Footnotes:**

- 1 Thom, Walter, *Pedestrianism* (Aberdeen, Chalmers and Company, 1813) p. 41.
- 2 Ibid., p. 46.
- 3 Ibid., pp. 46-47.
- 4 Ibid., p. 84.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 84-85.
- 6 Ibid., p. 88.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., p. 206.

- 9 Ibid., p. 209.
- 10 Ibid., p. 215.
- 11 Ibid., p. 219.
- 12 Ibid., p. 123.
- 13 Ibid., p. 230.
- 14 Ibid., p. 233.
- 15 Ibid., p. 234.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., p. 127.
- 18 Ibid., p. 125.
- 19 Ibid., p. 127.

