

60: The 100-miler: Part 7 (1930-1950) Wartime 100-Milers

Davy Crockett

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By Davy Crockett



After decades of 100-mile races, matches and successful finishes in less than 24 hours before 1930, the Great Depression turned ultrarunners' attention to more important matters – surviving. Opportunities to earn a living as a professional runner dried up as public interest waned. Memories of past accomplishments and records faded. Occasionally the newspapers would pull out of their dusty archives a story about Edward Payson Weston's walking wonders which was treated as "believe it or not" oddities, rather than something that others could accomplish.

But the spark of running or walking 100 miles on foot still smoldered during the next two decades despite the severe difficulties of the Depression and World War II. Isolated 100-mile accomplishments took place to remind the public what the human body could do, but 100 miles was still considered to be very far and out of reach by all but freakish athletes.

Gruber's "softies"



Declares U. S. Youth "Soft," Urges Better School Training

**General Gruber Deplores Rejection of One
Out of Every 2 Draftees; Advises
More Vocational Education**

During the World War II years, 100-mile races ceased, but some solo endurance efforts were sparked due to comments made by Brigadier General, Edmund L. "Snitz" Gruber (1879-1941) who stated that American youth were "soft." Gruber was the author and composer of the song "The Caissons Go Rolling Along." In January 1941, speaking before a church's men's club in Kansas City, Missouri, he said, "Our men have been living too soft a life." He stated that the military draft had revealed an astonishing weakness in the physical, vocational, and moral qualities of youth. He claimed that one out of every two youths were rejected because of physical fitness. Gruber died five months later during a game of bridge at the age of 61.

Gruber's comments cause a bit of an uproar and debate across America. Newspaper commentary included, "We know of no way to prove the general is in error and of no way to prove that he is right." But young men across the country found a way to provide some anecdotal proof that Gruber was wrong.



A week before Gruber's brash statement, Ted Morton, age 19, a former high school track star from Kansas City, was being denied a job as a clearing house messenger because the company's president didn't think he had the physical stamina for the work. He stated, "The lad looked rundown to me." Miffed over this rejection and mad about General Gruber's comments, Morton started a crusade to prove his doubters wrong.



Morton first ran 34 miles in 13:29 with a moving time of 7:30 as proof. A \$10 wager also pushed him along. He ran in alternating hours, resting an hour in between. His inspiring accomplishment was performed on a 400-yard high school track. The day after he said, "I feel fine today. Got up and went to church too. I hope the general hears about this."

The general did hear about it. Gruber wrote a letter of congratulations to the youth stating that he hoped the performance "would inspire other young men to watch their health and keep themselves in good physical condition." Morton was soon hired by the army as messenger for a commanding officer and made daily walks and runs of 8-15 miles to deliver messages.

ALL SET FOR A 50-MILE SPRINT—



Morton continued to try to prove Gruber wrong, even after his death. In July 1941, he organized a 50-mile race in Kansas City that included six former track stars. The race was billed as "an attempt to prove that American youth is adequately fit to defend their country." Representatives from the AAU even came to watch along with thousands of spectators. A six-mile course was used in Swope Park and the young men were required to rest for fifteen minutes every two hours.

"The oldest contestant, Milton Graham, a 30-year-old truck driver, gave out at the end of eight miles, complaining a football knee was troubling him. As the sun climbed and the mileage passed 20 miles, there was little running going on. Ted Morton collapsed three times on his fourth 6-mile lap, but he recovered sufficiently from severe leg cramps to finish second, dropping out at the 44-mile point."



Bill Breidenthal

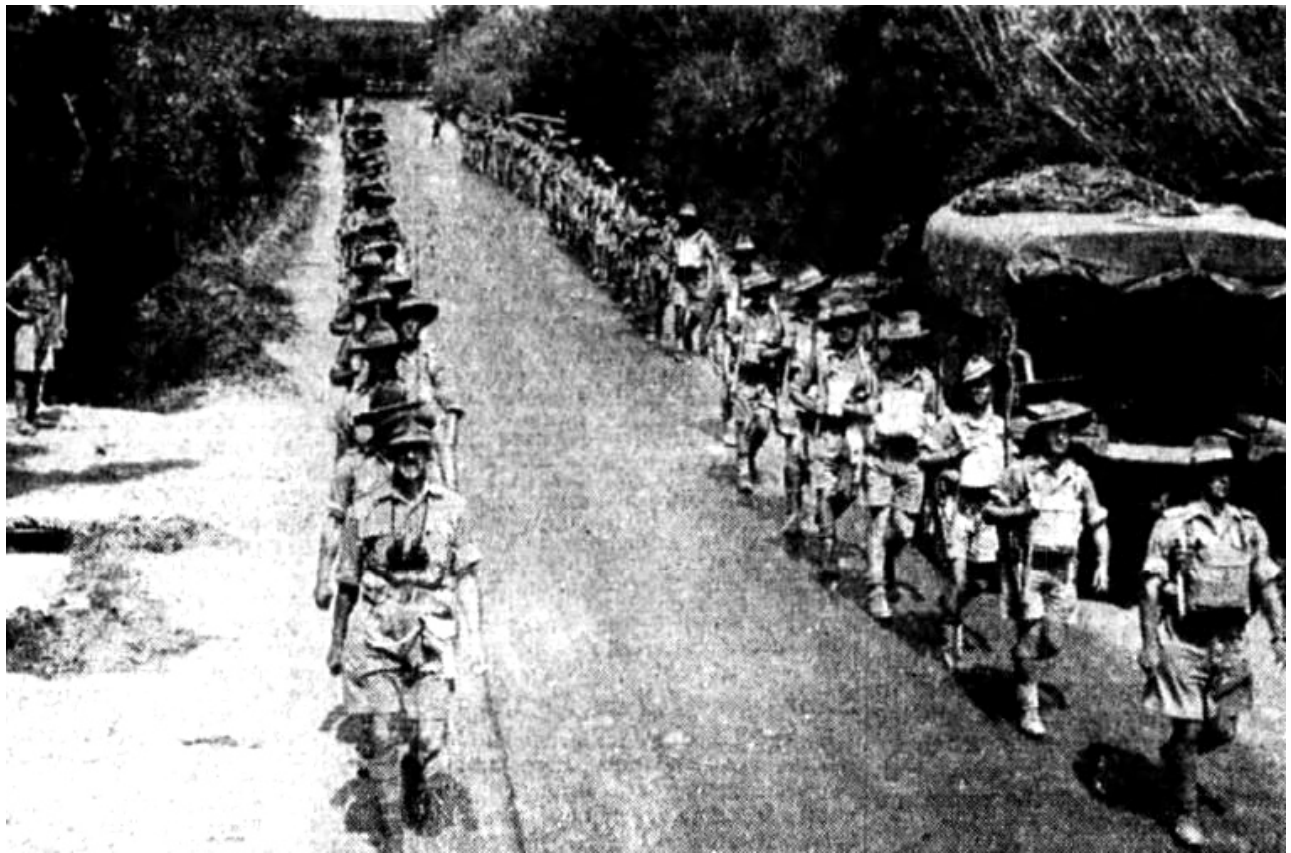
19 YEAR OLD POSTAL CLERK RUNS 50 MILES

**Bill Breidenthal Goes to
Church Services After
Finishing Race in 10
Hours, 17 Minutes**

Bill Breidenthal, a 19-year-old mail clerk for Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, won the 50-mile race with a time of 10:17. Breidenthal's crew, consisting of two amateur boxers, gave him massages 25 times during the race. They only brought rubbing alcohol, sugar cubes, and salt tablets. Breidenthal went on to serve in the army air corps. He died while serving in the war two years later at the age of 22.

The notoriety Morton received for his running exploits continued to spur him on. In September 1941, he attempted to run 100 miles in less than 24 hours, going from Nevada, Missouri to Kansas City, Missouri. Physicians warned him that he should not plan to run the entire stretch at one time. He ran on U.S. highway 71 with the help of pacer Frank Grantello. Morton's girlfriend, Betty Grantello, daughter of his pacer, rode along providing support from a car. His crew said he ran 6-10 miles at a stretch and then rested 10-15 minutes. Morton was successful and reached 100 miles in 23:54.

War-time 100-milers



Courageous 100-mile efforts took place during the World War II years in many forms. For example, in 1940, Daniel Olecnovich, a famous horse jockey who rode at Belmont Park, walked 100 miles through Poland as the Germans invaded. He successfully made it to Italy and intended to return to the United States and train horses at Peepskill, New York.

Walks to Join Up

In 1941, E. G. Barbette of Canada was determined to sign up and serve in the war. He walked 100 miles in two nights and a day in order to arrive in time at a recruitment office. "He walked without stopping to sleep, eating from a meager lunch which he carried with him. All the time it was raining and the going was tough." He had to ford waist-deep through a cold stream with a strong current. His determination paid off. He passed the examination and left dressed in a uniform.

A Dutch marine, "Bert" who visited the USO Club at Camp Davis, North Carolina, told an interesting tale to those there. When the Germans closed the schools in Holland, the students went off to work on the outlying farms. Bert became a farmhand about 100 miles from his home city of Amsterdam. He said, "Two days after Christmas I was in the field, and looking up, saw my mother standing close by. Thinking I was dreaming, I rubbed my eyes to wipe away the tears. Then my mother spoke saying 'Merry Christmas, son.' It really was my mother. She had walked the 100 miles to be with me on Christmas, but the journey had taken her longer than she had anticipated, and so she was two days late."



Many 100-mile marches took place around the world. In 1942 a large number of Australian troops completed a 100-mile march in the Middle East. They marched with full equipment and took five days. Also, in 1943, 4,000 soldiers marched 100 miles across the Blue Mountains from Sydney to Bathurst in Australia. One of the first Italian infantry units marched 100 miles that year through the Calabria Mountains to join the Allies.

Rangers in the United States Army received especially tough training. "Their training included toughening up day and night exercises in which they often marched 100 miles in two days with little rest and few rations. Such marches led them through rivers and up precipitous cliffs. They wiggled through barbed wire and dense undergrowth, and to simulate battle conditions live bullets whizzed over head or kicked up dust behind them."

Lt. Omar N. Bradley, who at one time was overall commander of American troops fighting in France, earlier had served at Fort Riley, Kansas where his horse-drawn artillery battery was the first known unit to complete a 100-mile forced march in less than 24 hours! Yes, even in the army sub-24-hour 100-milers were accomplished by men in uniform.

100-Mile March To Test Mettle Of U. S. Infantry^N

In June 1943, the army conducted a forced march of 100 miles from Atlanta to Fort Benning, Georgia. The purpose was to assess the readiness of the 176th infantry soldiers for battle. The men were picked at random and they marched about 40 miles per day. The results helped determine what speed foot troops could cover over a distance of 100 miles "and still be able to put up a good fight at the conclusion of the march." For similar and even longer war-time forced marches see "The Ultradistance Marches (1941-45)"

100 miles across the Sahara Desert

In 1943, Sergeant Alban Petchal of Steubenville, Ohio was on a plane flying as a gunner, heading to the war in Africa. When they reached Central Africa, near a combat zone, Petchal's plane became separated from the rest and wound up running out of gas over the Sahara Desert. "They rode the plane into the sand dunes, which were everywhere, and about two stories high. They bounced across the tops of four and slammed head on into the fifth. All three men were painfully hurt."

The men crawled out of the wrecked plane, patched up their wounds and made a shelter out of their life raft. After three days the three wounded men decided that they would have to walk out of the desert. They sprinkled the plane with gasoline and set it on fire. They then started off on what they knew would be perilous 100-mile journey carrying a five-gallon can of water slung from a stick. Along the way, they battled sickness and freezing nights. Two officers became delirious and quarreled violently. "Finally they found tracks, and the same day ran onto a camel caravan. The Arabs fed them and invited to join them. The boys tried to ride the camels, but it was so rough and horrible that they finally had to get off and walked." After walking a total of 100 miles across the desert they finally arrived at a French unit.

Prisoners of War 100-mile marches



As prisoners were captured during the war, once freed, many told tales of 100-mile marches as prisoners of war. The most famous, and probably the most tragic was the “Death March of Bataan” in the Philippines. The distance was likely quite a bit less than 100 miles, but to those who participated and survived, it typically was described as a 100-mile journey.

After four months of intense battle, on April 9, 1942, American troops surrendered to the Japanese. The captured Americans and Filipinos were subjected to a torturous march of more than 65 miles during which thousands died. Many books have been written about the event.



Lt. James Kermit Vann described his “100-mile death march.” He felt lucky that he survived the march, but he suffered terribly. He wrote, “This prisoner army of almost 3,000 most of them dirty ragged and unshaven was led to a road and under cloudless skies was ordered to march. None of us got any water until nightfall. We had passed many natural wells off the road, but the bayonets wouldn’t let us near them.



At times we were ordered to sit down in the road under the hot sun. Anyone who tried to stand up was knocked down. Anyone who tried to stretch out his legs was forbidden to relax. We sat there for four or five hours. It wasn't long before I came down with malaria, beri-beri, dysentery and other ailments. It wasn't until the fifth day that we were given any food. There was almost no conversation among the men. They were too sick, too weak, too hollow-eyed and sunken-cheeked to care about anything except home. I was so weak and dizzy that I don't remember too much about the rest of the march. I believe we made the 100-mile march in seven days." 100-mile runners are concerned about losing too much weight during their events. Lt. Vann lost 55 pounds during his march, to a weight of 105 pounds.



There were also prisoner 100-mile marches to Germany. Lt. Donald Alfred Ohl (1920-2011) of Iowa City, Iowa was crossing the Moselle in France with his unit in September 1944. "The bridge we crossed was blown up behind us. I found myself looking down the mouth of a German 88 millimeter cannon." The men were marched 100 miles to the German border, with 45 miles of it in one day. Lt. Ohl suffered from broken arches in his feet. After the second day's march they were handed over to the SS, put into prison cells and eventually sent off to a Stalag. At the end of the war he was freed.

100 miles to Germany



John Mecklin

In 1944, near the end of the war in Europe, the German army was in retreat from France. Thousands of Allied prisoners were being held at Montigny, France. They were told by their German captors that they were going to be marched 100 miles through the war chaos to Germany. John Mecklin (1918-1971) was an American correspondent who had been taken prisoner and wrote about the terrifying 100-mile march. About 2-3,000 men began the 100-miler in a column about a mile long.

"When we started, we were in reasonably good spirits, but that did not last long. After an hour or two the whole column moved in sullen beaten silence." The men and the Germans were in constant fear of being bombed by American planes who had no idea that a prisoner 100-mile march was taking place. "We made an ideal air target. The road ran almost entirely through open, rolling fields. Even the ditches were too shallow for good protection. I carried a blanket, a musette bag, a canteen of water, toilet articles and two cans of German tinned meat, and with each step the load became heavier."

The Germans set the initial pace, but before long, the prisoners who were younger and in better shape, took over the pace. Finally, the exhausted Germans decided to use a bus to shuttle prisoners in a round-robin fashion up the road in five-mile stretches. Cheating the 100-mile course for stretches was a luxury as they rode with their guard in a corner of the bus with a revolver balanced in his lap.

At Bourbonne-les-Bains, the 100-miler became a pure “endurance contest.” They walked steadily for three hours without rest. The Germans knew they were racing ahead of the advancing Allied forces and were very nervous. Finally, the bus crashed into a ditch and was broken down. There would be no more rides during this 100-miler. When a small pick-up truck came by, the Germans elbowed each other to pile in, one sobbing that he could walk no farther. But the Americans had no choice but to continue their long walk.

“The whole atmosphere among the men in the column was beginning to change. They became a sweaty, dragging anguish. Panic was beginning to seep into the minds of the men on that endless road, while the sun beat down and seared everything. When the column passed villages, we prisoners would straighten up and walk firmly.”

As they continued on, the Germans started talking in low voices and the prisoners feared that they would soon be shot. A guard told them that they could run into the woods and escape around the next bend. Was he trying to give them a reason to get shot? Mecklin and few other went off the 100-mile course and dashed into the woods. They threw away all that they carried and ran at top speed and then tried to find someone to put them up for the night. Finally, at dusk three men came toward them and to their relief they wanted to help. “They took us to an ancient mill on the edge of the village and before long we were the center of attraction at a full dress banquet. Fifty people came to visit us within an hour. We went out with the people to stand in the square and sing the French nation anthem. An officer said, ‘You are free. The Germans will not be back.’” It was one of the greatest celebrations for DNFing a 100-miler in history.

Frank Tozer – prolific 100-mile walker



Frank Wallace Tozer was born May 24, 1879 in South Bristol, New York. He became a farmer from Ithaca, New York and in 1910 at the age of 31, stirred up attention when he departed on a long endurance walk to New Orleans, Louisiana. He claimed that he was accustomed to walking long distances and his hobby was pedestrianism. He delivered lectures along the way.

He also became a bicycle enthusiast and in 1926 pedaled all the way to Florida. Tozer gained wide fame in 1938 when he set out from Ithaca New York, accompanying two others, a policeman and a fireman, on a 34-mile walking race to Elmira New York. Tozer finished first in 7:50, beating the policeman, Daniel B. Flynn, by nearly three hours. After arriving, Tozer declined a ride home and completed his return trip in 8:20.



ATTEMPTS TO WALK HERE AND BACK TO ITHACA IN 24 HOURS

**Tozer Tired and Dusty, but
Confident He'll Achieve
His Goal**

Tozer quickly added to this accomplishment in August 1938 by attempting a 100-mile walk to Binghamton, New York and back in 24 hours. He previously had accomplished it in 26 hours. He said, "Only a rainstorm will stop me." It was reported at the 50-mile mark in Binghamton, "Tired and dusty, but undaunted, Frank Tozer walked into the offices of the Binghamton Press after 12 ½ hours. He was confident that he would be able to return to Ithaca before the deadline."

But the 59-year-old walker had difficulty on his return trip. He tried to take a shorter route but made a wrong turn and walked bonus miles. When the 24 hours expired, he was still about 20 miles from the finish. He learned the he really needed to have a crew car drive along with him. He stated, "When you are walking against time, you don't have any time to stop and make inquiries. I would have been better off with help like that."

Man Takes 100-Mile Walk For Vacation

In 1943, Tozer, age 64, was living in Harrisburg Pennsylvania, and wanted to prove that war travel restrictions couldn't prevent people from getting away on vacations if they really wanted to go. He planned a 100-mile course to walk that involved a road walk from Harrisburg to York and back for the first 55 miles, a five-mile walk through Harrisburg, and for the last 40 miles, forty crossings of a mile-long bridge across the Susquehanna River. He was successful in accomplishing the 100 miles in 24 hours on Memorial Day.

Later in 1943, Tozer returned to Ithaca and was employed at the Cornell University Library. In November 1945, at the age of 66, he measured off a two-mile stretch and walked it over and over again to reach 100 miles during a 24-hour period. This walk was very challenging because of a bitter cold wind. He was paced by Orhan Ilgaz a college student from Turkey who usually walked 6-7 miles per day. For 1946, Tozer walked around Cayuga Lake and through several towns to again accomplish 100 miles.



At age 68, in 1947, Tozer explained his secret to a long happy life. "Eat right, sleep right and walk 10 miles a day." Each day as weather permitted, he walked to and from work for a round trip of 10 miles. He would encourage young people to walk with him but they would give up trying to match his pace. He added that each summer he tried to get in at least one 100-mile 24-hour walk. "He has been taking these 'century walks' for his pleasure and health chiefly to test his stamina and to determine for himself that he could still take it."

During May 1947, he decided to walk 100 miles from Ithaca to Rochester, New York to deliver a letter to the newspaper there and to visit relatives. His first attempt was a bust because of a bad rainstorm along the way that caused bad blisters. But in July he was successful and finished his 100 miles in less than 24 hours.



Sadly, on January 11, 1950, at the age of 70, Tozer died of a stroke while in the Cornell University Library. "Fellow workers found the famed long distance walking man in the steam room of the institution."

Mote Bergman

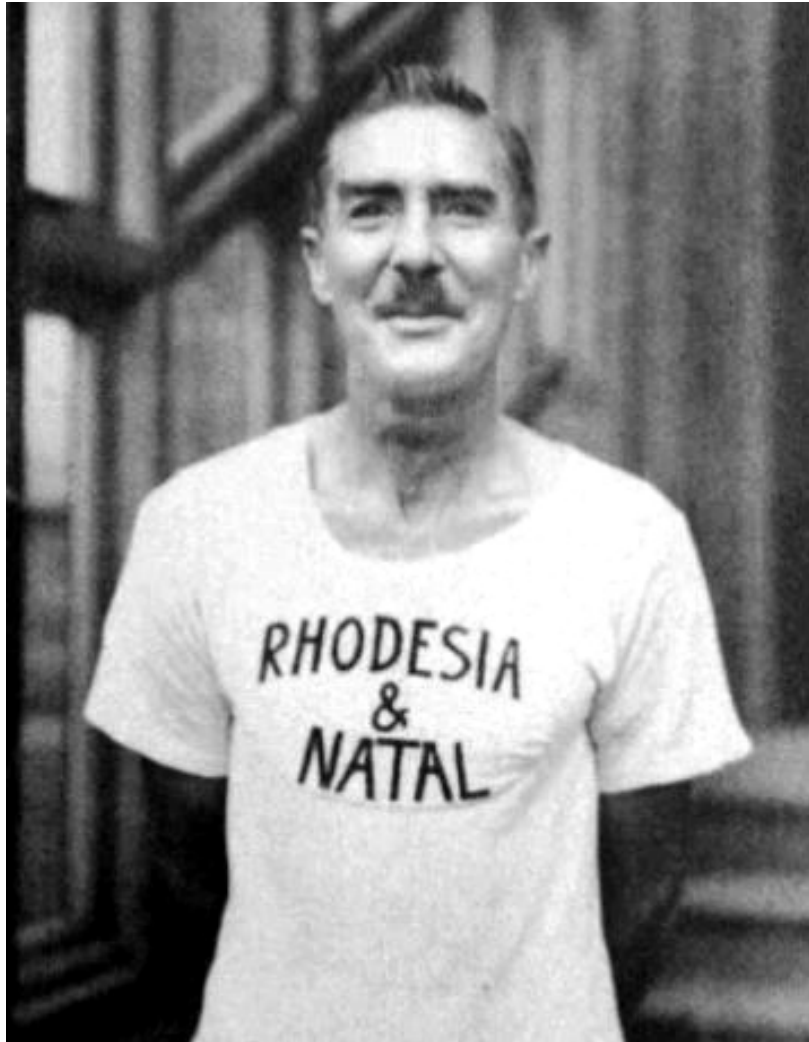


Alvin "Mote" Bergman, of Leetsdale, Pennsylvania was a professional pre-war ultrarunner who would compete regularly in a 50-mile "Pittsburgh Leader Race" in the years around 1915. He was mostly a walker but also ran a very impressive 74 miles in 12 hours in 1930 in Philadelphia. During the Great Depression he became a well-known accomplished walker and by 1937 gained fame nationally as "the birthday walker" when he walked 50 miles on his 50th birthday. He claimed that he had already covered 250,000 miles lifetime on foot.

Walking 100 miles in a day became Bergman's goal. In 1939 at age 52, he took his walking talents to the Leetsdale High School track where he walked/ran 100 miles in 22:05 on the quarter mile track. He would accomplish several other sub-24-hours 100s in the future. It was reported, "He frequently walks 20 miles before breakfast just to get up an appetite, and he always fasts as part of his training before a long distance stroll."

On August 26, 1950, Bergman accomplished another sub-24-hour 100-mile walk. He walked through several towns with a car following to measure the distance on the odometer. When it showed 50 miles, he turned around and started back. He finished in about 23:30, which was one of the first sub-24-hour 100-milers accomplished by an American in the post-war era of ultrarunning.

Arthur Newton



In England, Arthur Newton accomplished a new 100-mile record of 14:06 on the Bath Road in 1934 at the age of 51, the crowning running triumph of his career. (See part 6). Despite all the attention received on this occasion, Newton knew that others would come who would run 100 miles faster. He was convinced that breaking 14 hours was possible. Afterall, he knew that back in 1882 Charles Rowell reached 100 miles in 13:26:30, indoors on a small track in Madison Square Garden. Others did come, even during the tragic decades of the 1930's and 1940's.

Hardy Ballington



Hardy Robert Ballington was born July 14, 1912 in South Africa. By 1932, at the age of 20, Ballington emerged as promising new runner. In the early 1930s, a veteran runner, Vernon Jones, spotted young Ballington on a training run. He noticed that he had huge calf muscles and said to Ballington, "Young man, you ought to take part in the Comrades Marathon." Ballington set his sights on running Comrades (54 miles).

He did, in 1933, and finished in a surprising 4th place with 8:01. The following year he won the Durban Athletic Club Marathon in 3:08. But he soon put his concentration on the ultra-distances and believed he could win Comrades. He would become one of the greatest of all the Comrades champions.



In 1933, Ballington joined a field of 85 runners in the 13th edition of Comrades. The weather was poor with rain and freezing wind. By the half-way point he was running in third place. He fell behind some as he stopped to change his shoes. But soon he took charge of the race and passed the leaders climbing Botha's Hill and quickly extended his lead. "Wearing a sweater as protection against the rain and cold, Ballington forged ahead in the closing stages. There was no stopping him. Comrades had a new great champion." He became only the second runner after Newton to break the seven-hour barrier with a time of 6:50:37.

Ballington's success continued, winning Comrades again in 1934 and 1936. During the depression era, he became known as the world's greatest ultra-distance runner.

Ballington's London to Brighton Record



Newton and Ballington

In 1937, Ballington skipped running Comrades and instead wanted to go after Arthur Newton's 50 and 100-mile records that he set in England. Newton was the driving force behind Ballington's attempts that were sponsored by News of the World. Ballington traveled to England in April with his expenses paid for him. Newton paid special attention to Ballington, escorting him by bike on his training runs. He logged an astonishing 1,100 miles on training runs in one month.

**RECORD RUN TO
BRIGHTON**
— — — — —
**A MARGIN OF ONE
SECOND**

At the special May 22, 1937 London to Brighton running race, eight runners including Ballington competed. The 24-year-old ran steady, to his own schedule, crewed by Newton. "He maintained practically the same pace throughout. A head wind and rain made conditions extremely difficult for the great part of the way, but he showed no signs of fatigue and finished with a very strong sprint." After he crossed the finish line, it was announced that he had beat Newton's 1924 course record by a minute and a half. But then a confusing announcement went out that he had failed by 12 seconds. But later it was determined because of different finishing points, Ballington's run was about 100 yards further and his official time was adjusted to 5:53:42, beating Newton's time by one second, a record held for the next 16 years.

Ballington's 100-mile World Record



On July 3, 1937, Ballington, again assisted by Newton and also by 100-mile great, Mike McNamara, ran the Bath Road from Box to Hyde Park. (The distance at that time was believed to be 100 $\frac{1}{4}$ miles, but it actually is believed that the route was less than 100 miles.) His crew had challenges. "Newton had to deal with an unfortunate episode in a tea shop, where the haughty proprietor would only serve tea in cups for drinking on the premises, and wouldn't allow Newton to fill a flask to take outside to thirsty Ballington."



Nevertheless, Ballington crushed Newton's time, finishing in 13:21:19, which also beat Charles Rowell's 1882 time of 13:26:30. For the following week, both Ballington and Newton held daily public appearances at the News of the World's sports department. For Ballington's impressive accomplishments, far away in America, he was recognized at "The Sportsman of 1937" by the Helms world trophy organization in California. It took them 20 years to track down Ballington to send him the trophy.

Through the challenging World War II times of the 1940s, not much is known about Ballington's running efforts, but in 1947, after the war, Ballington won the Comrades Marathon for the fifth and final time at the age of 35. He went on to be a travel agent and by 1966 had flown around the world six times visiting the major cities of the world. In 1969 Comrades established the "Hardy Ballington Trophy" for the first novice runner to finish the race.

College Students

Both Losers

Cambridge Men Try To Walk 100 Miles To London in 24 Hours

College students got into the 100-mile game during the 1930s. In 1933 six naïve but determined students from the University of Cambridge, in England, set out to walk 100 miles in 24 hours from Cambridge to London and back. Their motivation was to win \$500 or lose \$10. Four of them were clearly in over their heads and quit early. Two others did well. R. A. Mason developed bad blisters but managed to make it to mile 90 before quitting. G. N. Wilson went the furthest but gave up at mile 95 with only a few minutes remaining. In 1934 four other Cambridge students fared better and finished 100 miles in 24 hours, winning the 50-1 bet.

The parts of this 100-mile series:

- 54: Part 1 (1737-1875) Edward Payson Weston
- 55: Part 2 (1874-1878) Women Pedestrians
- 56: Part 3 (1879-1899) 100 Miles Craze
- 57: Part 4 (1900-1919) 100-Mile Records Fall
- 58: Part 5 (1902-1926) London to Brighton and Back
- 59: Part 6 (1927-1934) Arthur Newton
- 60: Part 7 (1930-1950) 100-Milers During the War
- 61: Part 8 (1950-1960) Wally Hayward and Ron Hopcroft
- 62: Part 9 (1961-1968) First Death Valley 100s
- 63: Part 10 (1968-1968) 1969 Walton-on-Thames 100
- 64: Part 11 (1970-1971) Women run 100-milers
- 65: Part 12 (1971-1973) Ron Bentley and Ted Corbitt
- 66: Part 13 (1974-1975) Gordy Ainsleigh
- 67: Part 14 (1975-1976) Cavin Woodward and Tom Osler
- 68: Part 15 (1975-1976) Andy West

69: Part 16 (1976-1977) Max Telford and Alan Jones

70: Part 17 (1973-1978) Badwater Roots

71: Part 18 (1977) Western States 100

72: Part 19 (1977) Don Ritchie World Record

73: Part 20 (1978-1979) The Unisphere 100

74: Part 21 (1978) Ed Dodd and Don Choi

75: Part 22 (1978) Fort Mead 100

76: Part 23 (1983) The 24-Hour Two-Man Relay

77: Part 24 (1978-1979) Alan Price – Ultrawalker

79: Part 25 (1978-1984) Early Hawaii 100-milers

81: Part 26 (1978) The 1978 Western States 100

87: Part 27 (1979) The Old Dominion 100

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