

The Long Walk

Introduction

In February 1960, I had only been a member of Birchfield Harriers a few months and was still at school. In that short time I had the privilege of seeing and meeting many athletes who were at the time, 'stars'. The word 'superstar' hadn't yet been invented. I was in awe of athletes like Peter Radford; Mike Rawson; Mike Farrell and John Salisbury who all trained regularly at the old Alexander Stadium in Perry Barr. But who was that woman walking round the boards with a group of girls? She was one athlete that was soon to become a "superstar", to me at least, even though the word at that stage wasn't in my vocabulary. She was a 31 year old International Race Walker, holder of the British Mile record of 7 minutes 38.4 seconds set in 1954, had recently led a team of four to victory in the very first women's walking international against Denmark in Copenhagen. She had been six times Midland mile track champion, four times British mile track champion, three times Midland road walking champion and the current British road walking champion. Her name was Beryl Randle.

Before the days of the running boom in the late 70's early 80's and the advent of the fun run prompted by a certain James Fixx, there was an equivalent called the sponsored walk. This sprung from the efforts of a rather eccentric vegetarian by the name of Dr Barbara Moore who walked from John O'Groats to Land's End amidst a blaze of publicity. This in turn sparked off individuals to follow in her footsteps and the challenge of the JOGLE was born. Wendy Lewis, an 18 year old Liverpool hairdresser, completed the route in less than 25 days. The name of Wendy Lewis was to become linked to the name of Beryl Randle in a way which had every Birchfield Harrier gasping.

Billy Butlin, of holiday camp fame, became interested in these individual efforts and decided to sponsor a race from John O'Groats to Land's End and he would put up £5000 prize money. This race, which would never take place today because of the traffic conditions, started on the 26th February 1960.

Beryl Randle was 31 years old. She had won every competition available to her. Her burning ambition was to compete in the Olympics but there were no women's walking events. She was quoted in the Women's Mirror as saying "When you get past 30, I think it's about time to stop." She had a decision to make, a decision that could affect her amateur status and her future in race walking. Beryl wasn't one to turn down a challenge and what bigger challenge than walking from John O'Groats to Land's End? Not only walking but



Grim and determined Beryl Randle steps out in one of her races as an amateur with Birchfield Harriers

walking in a race against others. *"When you have been used to some walking, every race is a challenge, and once you start, all you want to do is see if you can reach the end"* she said. Her mind was made up.

But how do you train for this type of event? Beryl was working full time in an office in Digbeth, Birmingham and lived in Walsall. The answer was simple, walk to work and back, 18 miles a day, plus normal training!

The Race

Friday, 26th February 1960

The race started in the evening and for the first few days proved uneventful. The body had to get used to the effort involved and to the routine of, walking; resting; walking; resting and yet more walking.

Tuesday, 1st March 1960, Day 4

Leader of the race was David Robinson, aged 37, from Bermuda. He had reached Lochearnhead, 292 miles covered and 30 miles ahead of his nearest rival. He had averaged 73 miles a day since the start. The women's leader was Wendy Lewis, only 90 minutes in front of Beryl.

Wednesday, 2nd March 1960, Day 5

David Robinson's lead had been reduced to 20 miles and there was no change in the women's positions. These were early days.

Thursday, 3rd March 1960, Day 6

David Robinson had covered a third of the distance as he arrived at Abington, Lanarkshire during the early morning. He had spent most of the night combining walking with running after only 3 hours sleep. His lead was now over 40 miles from 26 years old, John Grundy. Wendy Lewis had been 20 miles in the lead and had taken advantage of this to rest for 14 hours at Crianlaric during the night. Only a few minutes after she left the hotel, Beryl strode into Crianlaric after being on the road since 6.30am. The two rivals met twice during the day – first at Lochearn during lunch and again at Callender early evening when Beryl took the lead. Wendy Lewis was having ankle trouble and had received medical treatment. She revealed at Callender that since the start she had received four proposals of marriage! Both women were reported to be looking tired.

Friday, 4th March 1960, Day 7

Beryl maintained her lead during the day. Meanwhile in the men's race, David Robinson was still in the lead, which had been reduced to 20 miles. Alfred Rozenthals was lying second with John Grundy only 5 miles behind. It was announced that when Wendy Lewis had recovered from the walk she was planning to walk 3,000 miles across Europe from London to Rome. Sponsors had been found!! Maureen Ashley from Much Wenlock, aged 24 was in fourth position in the women's race. She was limping badly and had not been in bed for three days.

Saturday, 5th March 1960, Day 8

Beryl Randle was still in the lead with Wendy Lewis challenging strongly. As dusk fell, Beryl reached Gretna near the English border. She had marginally increased her lead from 4 to 7 miles. Still very close. Beryl was at this point reported to be the favourite for the £1000 prize. David Robinson was suffering from cramp and

feeling ill and was undergoing treatment from a physiotherapist. He hobbled on, aided by two sticks, after 14 hours rest at Penrith but he had lost the lead to Alfred Rozenthals. About 350 competitors were still in the race after 8 days and were spread over 300 miles of road extending through eight counties.

Sunday, 6th March 1960, Day 9

Beryl's lead had remained constant and was still 4 miles when she reached Penrith. She stopped for a cup of tea and was soon on her way to Shap, 10 miles further on. There had been a rumour that Beryl had accused Wendy Lewis of taking a lift, a rumour she vigorously denied. "*I never said anything of the sort*" she said. Wendy Lewis meanwhile was confident of catching up with Beryl! "*I am out to win this race*" she said. In the men's race, Keith Carrington, aged 22 of York, had took the lead during the afternoon, but while he rested at Preston during the evening he was overtaken by the Bilsthorpe miner, Alfred Rozenthals, from whom he had taken the lead earlier. Rozenthals planned to go on to Wigan before resting. Only a few miles now separated the first four competitors. James Musgrave, aged 38, was lying third in the early afternoon but was overtaken approaching Lancaster by John Grundy who was occasionally running. Down in fifth place was the early leader, David Robinson, who had discarded the two sticks and seemed to be now walking normally. He had announced that he was intending to only rest for two hours during the night and that he was going better and improving every hour.

Monday, 7th March 1960, Day 10

For the two women leaders it was still nip and tuck. Just an hour separated them with Beryl in front. Later in the evening, Beryl had extended her lead to 14 miles as she left Lancaster. Alfred Rozenthals was still the leader in the men's race. He too was a race walker who would lose his amateur status. Bill Butlin, the promoter of the race, announced that competitors who were more than 300 miles behind the leaders would no longer be considered to be taking part but they could continue if they wished!

Tuesday, 8th March 1960, Day 11

Beryl was maintaining her lead but only just. Wendy Lewis was still keeping Beryl's lead down to one hour by the time Warrington was reached. Beryl was becoming a popular figure on the road. Just north of Warrington a whole girl's school cheered her on and people in villages and towns stopped to applaud her. Beryl, dressed in a green knitted hat; a short navy donkey jacket; grey trousers and leather walking shoes, waved to them as she had waved to all well-wishers along the route. Alfred Rozenthals led for much of the day setting a tough target of over 80 miles. He had already covered over 50 miles since the previous day and he was taking very little rest. John Grundy meanwhile had been running for much of the time and was gradually catching up the leader. Whilst Rozenthals was resting in a café near Kidderminster, Grundy overtook him. However Rozenthals was expected to regain the lead when Grundy was resting for 8 hours.

Wednesday, 9th March 1960, Day 12

The first of the women walkers to reach Shropshire was Liverpool's Wendy Lewis who overtook Beryl while she was sleeping in a hotel. At Whitchurch, Wendy rested during the morning and Beryl regained the lead. "*I feel fine, despite the wind; rain and snow*" she said on the road to Wellington. When asked what she

thought about when walking, she replied, *"Sometimes I don't think of anything and I don't remember easily the distances I have covered I often think of my husband and wonder who is laundering his shirts. Each morning I start off usually about 6.30 or 7.00am. I set myself a target for lunch time. When I get there I set a target for tea time and so on."* Beryl was aiming for Bridgnorth for her overnight stay. Here she was met by her husband, Ron, and fellow Birchfield Harriers. Meanwhile Wendy Lewis was resting at Wellington. The men were still fighting a close battle. Alfred Rozenthals was leading early morning but was overtaken by John Grundy at night when passing through Gloucester where Rozenthals was asleep in a hotel. James Musgrave in third place stayed the night at Tewkesbury planning a 4.00am start.

Thursday, 10th March 1960, Day 13

Beryl was hanging on to her slender lead and was reported to be 9 miles in front when she left Worcester at 2.00pm. She had now led



Mrs Beryl Randle, of Walsall, leading woman in the Butlin marathon walk, is seen striding before a load of cars near Whitchurch.



The point-duty policeman signals to the traffic and Mrs Beryl Randle walks on through the centre of Kidderminster

for the majority of the race, was about a day's walk behind the men and was covering 50 miles a day at an average speed of 5 mph. She arrived at Tewkesbury at 5.25pm reported to be walking at a very fast pace and appearing quite fresh. *"I am feeling fine"* she said *"I am going on again tonight but am not sure how far I shall get"*. Wendy Lewis lost some ground when she had a medical check and spent over two hours on lunch between Kidderminster and Worcester where she celebrated her 19th Birthday by drinking a glass of champagne with roast chicken. The three leaders in the men's race had breakfast together but by evening John Grundy was lying first with Rozenthals 4 miles behind and James Musgrave third. The early leader, David Robinson, was now in sixth place after being seen by a Harley Street specialist and was walking strongly.

Friday, 11th March 1960, Day 14

Beryl stopped in Bristol before continuing westwards. She had earlier been accompanied by Billy Butlin for part of the way. She was now extending her lead over Wendy Lewis who was reported to be *"quite tired"*. The big surprise with the men that James Musgrave had gained a



Mrs Beryl Randle, aged 31, of Walsall, the leading woman in the John O'Groats to Lands' End race, accompanied by Mr Billy Butlin as she entered Bristol

commanding lead and by Oakhampton he was 12 miles in front with 100 miles to go. He had less than 3 hours sleep in the previous 30 hours and said *"I feel fine. I shall be going passed Oakhampton tonight and won't have much rest. But even so, this is a piece of cake."*

Saturday, 12th March 1960, Day 15

Beryl was still leading and had left Taunton at noon heading for Cornwall well ahead of Wendy Lewis. She was lying in 9th position in the race and was reported as having blisters on her feet but was otherwise quite fit. Wendy had pulled a leg muscle and was struggling on. Leader of the race was James Musgrave with Grundy second and Rozenthals third. It was revealed that Musgrave had never been known to walk more than 100

yards in his life; he was a heavy smoker and a fair drinker and had confounded all of his friends!

Sunday, 13th March 1960, Day 16

After walking 48 miles on Saturday, Beryl started out from Crediton at 7.00am in slight drizzle. She reached Oakhampton at 11.00am where she stopped for half-an-hour for a light meal of egg beaten up in milk. There had been reports that she had collapsed with severe leg pains at Launceston but it was later learned that she had not and that she hadn't even reached the town! She arrived at the check point at Lifton and decided to sleep for 3 hours. She was back on the road by 7.30pm aiming for Bodmin, 26 miles away. Beryl revealed that she had twisted her ankle before reaching Crediton and had received medical attention as had Wendy Lewis for her pulled muscle. The race had been won by James Musgrave at 7.30am who received the £1000 first prize. Second was John Grundy, the marathon runner, 90 minutes behind, winning £500 and third was Alfred Rozenthals who received £250. Musgrave covered the 891 miles in 15 days 14 hours 32 minutes. Billy Butlin, showing he liked to gamble,



Mrs Beryl Randle pictured at Lifton, Devon as she struggled along with a damaged ankle in the marathon walking race from John O'Groats to Land's End. During the walk - she was often mistaken by the public for Wendy Lewis, the eventual winner - she lost a stone in weight "My slacks were 4 inches too big for me round the waist" she said.

awarded an extra £100 to the 5th placed walker. He lost a bet against himself when Victor Burr finished at Land's End wearing wellington boots!

Monday, 14th March 1960, Day 17

Whilst Beryl was resting between Roche and Indian Queens with only 40 miles to go, Wendy Lewis became the leading woman. Beryl had been having problems with her sprained ankle and had lost ground to Wendy when having medical attention at Lifton the previous day. She lost a valuable 3 hours. Both women had rested for less than 4 hours during the night. The new leader was reported to be desperately tired at Indian Queens when only 2 miles ahead of Beryl. She swayed as she walked at a pace not more than 2 mph.

Tuesday, 15th March 1960

Wendy reached Land's End at 12.40am in a blaze of glory, winning the £1000 first prize. She was escorted by a 3 mile queue of cars with thousands of people lining the roadside and garden walls cheering her on. An estimated 10,000 was at Land's End, where the headland was like a fair, with masses of cars and batteries of floodlights for film and television cameras. It was described as more fantastic than the reception given to Dr Barbara Moore. Beryl now had to take frequent short rests on medical advice after the strain caused to her ankles and shins on the previous Sunday. She said that the question of beating Wendy Lewis had now become a secondary consideration. *"The first thing is to be able to finish at all"*. A mile from Land's End, Beryl stopped to wash, change her blouse, put on some lipstick and her international blazer. She was determined to finish looking like a woman. Billy Butlin had asked Beryl if she would delay her finish so that he could personally present her with the £500 second prize plus a bonus of £500. Beryl arrived at 8.48am and duly received the unexpected £1000. Billy Butlin said that he admired Beryl's courage. *"Things were so much more difficult for her when she had to pass under 'Welcome Wendy' banners and hear people in the crowds asking 'Where's Wendy?' It was inevitable because Wendy is remembered in this part of the world."* The crowd had gone by the time Beryl arrived at Land's End with only two or three cameras about. Most of the reporters were still in bed! She had taken 17 days 16 hours for the 891 miles.

Postscript

Later in the morning Beryl had a photo call with Wendy Lewis on the headland. Beryl wore a comfortable pair of fluffy slippers on her feet as a 'reward' to them for carrying her into second place. Both women had lost over a stone in weight and Wendy's face and arms were swollen.



Beryl Randle's 1,000 mile feet wear a comfortable pair of fluffy slippers as a "reward" for carrying the Walsall housewife into second place in the Butlin marathon. But she's still walking – hand-in-hand up the cliff path at Land's End with winner, Wendy Lewis

Billy Butlin then ordered two officials to carry the two women back to the hotel.

It was announced that Doris Harris, a Life Vice-President of Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section, had no option but to accept with regret Mrs Randle's resignation on relinquishing her amateur status.

Back home, Beryl received a hero's welcome. She found the house full of bouquets of flowers, messages of congratulations, reporters and photographers crammed into the living room and this at 3.00am! No chance of a lie in! When asked what was her worst moment? She replied *"When I reached Lifton, about 90 miles from the finish, a woman doctor told me I would never make it. The doctor inspected my left ankle, which I twisted going over a bridge and said the only cure would be 24 hours in hospital with penicillin treatment. I asked her to strap it up and carried on."* Asked if she would do it again, she replied *"No, once is enough. I am satisfied now and shall hang up my shoes for good as far as competitive walking is concerned."*



Mrs Beryl Randle, the Walsall marathon walker, pictured back at home today displaying the shoes which walked 1,000 miles and which she now intends to hang up for good.

Beryl, as we all know, was later reinstated and she is still walking competitively in the Midland Veterans Track & Field League. I never dreamed in 1960 that I would be asking Beryl to compete for Birchfield in the league and was honoured when she said yes. Beryl is also a prominent official and judge for the Race Walking Association.

Who is that woman walking the roads around Perry Park? Beryl Randle of course 'Superstar.'

The above account of the Billy Butlin John O’Groats to Land’s End walk was taken from press cuttings out of two local newspapers, The Birmingham Post and the Express & Star, February/March 1960

Addendum

Beryl no longer walks competitively but is continuing to work tirelessly for the Race Walking Association as judge; official and is a life member. She wore her international blazer; it still fits, at this year’s British Masters Athletic Federation Track & Field Championships where she was one of the walking judges.

Tom Morris, April 1995

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