

Track and Field

The Paris-Strasbourg Walk



A Journey to the End of the Night

Lunatics? Heroes? Exceptional people? Men to be pitied or encouraged? To be congratulated or locked up? Who are they, these unique sportsmen, whom the public look upon with such differing feelings?

They are simply walkers who, each June, take part in the race from Paris to Strasbourg, or vice versa.

"Five hundred and thirty kilometers

on foot, in three days and three nights—you've got to be nuts to do that!" You would lose count of the number of times this comment is heard as the 30 selected walkers pass by. In 1976, this daunting event celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first race (30 have been held).

In the last quarter of the 20th century, the age of supersonic planes

Robert Rinchar, accompanied by his followers, winning the jubilee walk in 1976.





The worst danger, blisters on one's feet.

Resting... alongside the route.



and trips to the moon, you can still find, every year, some 30 fanatics who would rather use their own legs to form a link, at a cost of tortures which the ordinary mortal can't begin to envisage, between the capitals of France and Alsace, or in the other direction... And these thirty have been chosen from six or seven hundred others who have undergone merciless eliminating events...

Their aim: to cover more than 500 km on foot, in three stages, with, in 1976, 4½ hours rest for every 75 hours walking.

These athletes are incredibly fit, with thousands of kilometers behind them, clocked up in daily training. They are men hardened against pain, capable of fighting off the nagging desire to sleep for three days and nights. Sportsmen whose watchword is willpower—their only reward, because, if there is one sport which still lives up to the true meaning of "amateur", it has to be walking...

No, they do not walk for prize-money, on the contrary. For, in many cases, Paris-Strasbourg is expensive. They have to take days off work and, if their club is not well off, they have to pay for people to be with them on the road. They walk because they love their sport: this is what it boils down to.

Out of the thirty courageous starters, the majority has no chance of finishing. And they know it. So

the ambition of each walker is to improve on his previous year's performance, to get a little further in his journey to the end of the night.

Wednesday, August 6th 1926, 12.15 pm. A vast crowd gathers in the Place de la République in Paris to see the start of the first Paris-Strasbourg race.

Why did Emile Anthoine, instigator of the race and the father-figure of French walking, choose Strasbourg as its destination? World War I had ended eight years before and he wanted to pay a resounding tribute to Alsace, which had only recently returned to its mother country.

Emile Anthoine had everything planned, but he had nevertheless underestimated human resources,

despite his knowledge of walkers. In his mind, he had reckoned that it would take at least four days to reach Strasbourg from Paris. The first winner, the Swiss Linder, took a little over three days. The time limit had been set at... 8 days. The last man, another Swiss called Wuest, came in after 180 hours. He finished more than four days after his fellow countryman.

The following year, the Paris-Strasbourg's reputation for dramatic incidents really took off. The victim of this one was Louis Godart, who subsequently won three times. A few hundred meters from the finishing line, when he was lying second behind Linder who was about to notch up his second vic-

In 1932, there were 76 starters. Here, the Swiss Linder (right) and the Italian Barelo.



Keystone

The Frenchman Ernest Romens, urged on by a crowd of anonymous supporters.



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tory, Godart's bottle-holder thought a little champagne might buck his man up. The result was disastrous... 200 m from the finish, Godart collapsed in a heap on the ground, and the spectators rushed to help him over the last few meters of his hellish journey.

But Emile Anthoine was making sure that the rules of his event were obeyed, and he was not bending them for anyone. "Death to Anthoine!" shouted the crowd, incensed by his harshness. Idle threats. For Anthoine refused categorically to count Godart in. And from that day, the instigator of the race was branded a tyrant.

The history of such an epic event is, of course, marked by many anec-

dotes, and the names of several winners spring to mind. However one of these stands out from the crowd: Gilbert Roger, six times the winner between 1949 and 1958, and who was nicknamed "Mister Paris-Strasbourg". He earned the right to the most fulsome descriptions: the magician of walking, super champion, superman, devilish, infernal, supernatural and many others. He was compared to the greatest French sportsmen of all time: Cerdan, Bobet, Kopa. Sadly, if Gilbert Roger tasted the same transitory glory as these men, he was a long way from becoming as rich as they, for he has remained an amateur in the true sense of the word. As have all walkers. The most

The greatest, Gilbert Roger, battling with the elements.



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The Swiss Hans Linder, fallen victim to cramp, is massaged at the side of the road.



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amusing anecdote concerning Gilbert Roger is that he was exempted from marching during his national service. Because he had flat feet...

There was Joseph Zami too, perhaps the most popular victor. Winner in 1950, three times second, twice third, this man from Martinique was born in 1902 and has gone down in the history of the race, in which he took part for the first time in... 1930! The reason for him competing was that he wanted to see Alsace.

There was Albert Seibert, a former boxer, who won in 1951 and 1952. Back in 1939, he went to Vienna and beat the Austrian champion by a knock-out, one Friday evening. Straight afterwards he set off for Lausanne where, on the Saturday, he was to take part in the 200 km walk World Championships, and he came third! He was a versatile champion and a true gentleman into the bargain.

There was another gap, due to the increase of traffic on the roads, and then the race started again in 1969. The history of the "modern" event, from Strasbourg to Paris, really belongs to two walkers. One from Luxembourg, Josy Simon, victor in 1971, 1972 and 1975, and a Belgian, Robert Rinchar, who won

A faithful competitor, Josy Simon (LUX).

in 1973, 1974 and 1976. Rinchard crossed the line first, in this jubilee Paris-Strasbourg contested in that burning hot summer, after trying the limits of human endurance to an impossible degree.

He was a terrible sight with his bloody feet, dying a thousand deaths: "Each time I put a foot on the ground, it felt as though I was walking on an over-heated electric plate", he said when he had finished. Perhaps more than any other, the 1976 Paris-Strasbourg showed the almost superhuman courage of these men who had the nerve to start out on the 530 km walk. For never had the sun shone

down so fiercely on the walkers. Fifty degrees centigrade for the fiftieth anniversary!

The 1976 race also showed that the Paris-Strasbourg needs some new blood. True, progress has not yet made it redundant, and Paris-Strasbourg provides the problems of another era.

But they are few now, the real long-distance walkers. New ones must be trained and allowed to develop. Walking is, after all, a basic human action.

Rinchard says: "There's nothing inhuman in it." It is true that walking is unique to men. But over 530 kilometers?...

The principal winners:

6 times: Gilbert Roger (FRA)
1949, 1953, 1954, 1956
1957, 1958

3 times: Louis Godart senior (FRA)
1928, 1929, 1931
Ernest Romens (FRA)
1933, 1935, 1937
Josy Simon (LUX)
1971, 1972, 1975
Robert Rinchard (BEL)
1973, 1974, 1976

2 times: Hans Linder (SWI)
1926, 1927
Albert Seibert (FRA)
1951, 1952

Time of the first winner:

Hans Linder:
78 hr 47 min over 554 km

Time of the most recent winner:

Robert Schouckens (BEL):
64 hr 11 min 25 sec over 507 km

Average speed record:

Gilbert Roger, 1953: 7.705 km/h
(including stoppages)

Robert Schouckens, 1977:
7.900 km/h
(but not taking obligatory stops into account)