

Oldfield, S.J. and Day, D. (2012) *James Robinson, Manchester "Ped" to Princeton Athletic Trainer*. British Society of Sports History, Annual Conference, Friday 7 – Saturday 8 September at the University of Glasgow, Glasgow.

The professional sport of pedestrianism declined towards the end of the nineteenth century due to the increased influence of the middle-class amateurs who imposed new rules and regulations as a means of controlling the working-class pastime. The Amateur Athletic Association (AAA), established in 1880, no longer welcomed professional pedestrian competitions, banning both the athletes and trainers of the sport in their new athletic constitution. The working-class patrons of pedestrianism found new entertainments but the athletes who were reliant on the professional activities for economic gain struggled to recover. However, due to the perceived transferrable nature of athletic training, some professionals obtained employment in soccer whilst others migrated to foreign countries where coaching was viewed more pragmatically. Many made the transatlantic journey to America where private organisations, athletic clubs and college teams secured the services of successful English trainers who became responsible for the conditioning and wellbeing of a diverse range of athletic performers. This paper will de-construct the biography of James Robinson, considering the structures that shaped his sporting career from working-class pedestrian to influential athletic trainer, providing insight into the changing nature of the athletic environment during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

1. INTRODUCTION

The professional sport of pedestrianism declined towards the end of the nineteenth century due to the increased influence of the middle-class amateurs who imposed new rules and regulations as a means of controlling the working-class pastime. The Amateur Athletic Association (AAA), established in 1880, no longer welcomed professional pedestrian competitions, banning both the athletes and trainers of the sport in their new athletic constitution. The working-class patrons of pedestrianism found new entertainments but the athletes who were reliant on the professional activities for economic gain struggled to recover. However, due to the perceived transferrable nature of athletic training, some professionals obtained employment in soccer whilst others migrated to foreign countries where coaching was viewed more pragmatically. Many made the transatlantic journey to America where private organisations, athletic clubs and college teams secured the services of successful English trainers who became responsible for the conditioning and well-being of a diverse range of athletic performers. The twentieth-first century has seen biographical research develop, moving away from traditional narratives of stars to the documenting of individuals whose athletic endeavours are relatively modest, therefore furthering knowledge of the

anonymous population who historians deem crucial in the development of modern sport. Through the deconstruction of biography, several 'layers of truth' can be uncovered, which provide a well-rounded impression of the subject, evolving thematically, not always chronologically. This paper presents the biography of James Robinson, considering the structures that shaped his sporting career from working-class athlete to influential athletic trainer, providing insight into the changing nature of the athletic environment during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries and identifying the different layers that made him, simply, the man he was.

2. ROBINSON THE ATHLETE

James Robinson was born in 1847 in Failsworth, Manchester, to Martha Worsick and William Robinson, a working-class butcher from Glossop.¹ Residing in Dob Lane, Robinson and his siblings continued to support the family business by apprenticing as butchers whilst in education. During his employment, Robinson competed in local amateur competitions for Failsworth, Mottram, Stalybridge and Manchester Athletic Clubs, specialising in the one and two mile walking events. Making headlines in August 1871, Robinson won his first competition at the Victoria Athletic Club annual meeting, Stoke-on-Trent, taking home a gold medal and a large silver cup for his performance in the club's principle events, the one and two-mile walking handicaps.² However, Robinson's walking caused much controversy in the press, with many believing his style to be 'unfair',³ and his defiance unfathomable,⁴ whilst others found his competitions well contested and in good form.⁵ After the St Helen's sports in January 1872, reports continued to criticise Robinson and his 'style of progression' when, after being disqualified for unfair heel-to-toe, he continued to race and successfully appealed to take first prize in the mile handicap. Spectators were outraged with the decision, with *Bell's Life* discussing the need for proper officials to be appointed to avoid these issues in the future. Nevertheless, Robinson continued to race, winning Northern meetings at Cloughfold, Penistone, Patcroft, and Haslingden,⁶ however his dominance in the sport was fading; his disqualification from several high profile races and a decreased level of performance saw Robinson fall into athletic obscurity.

Although a fine walker and successful in major competitions Robinson was always overlooked by the amateur organisations.⁷ The sport, and its athletes, were struggling to move away from their professional counterparts as prizes and money continued to fuel the amateur competitions, and the public perception of

¹ *England, Births and Christenings, 1538-1975*, James Robinson, baptised 05 Sep 1847 at Manchester Cathedral, Lancashire (C07354-2); *Census Returns*, William Robinson household 1851 (HO 107/2232/497/31-32); William Robinson household 1861 (RG 9/2973/36/18); William Robinson household 1871 (RG 10/4065/48/41).

² *Birmingham Daily Post*, August 10, 1871, 5; August 11, 1871, 6.

³ *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, August 12, 1871, 4.

⁴ *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, August 10, 1872, 5.

⁵ *Birmingham Daily Post*, August 14, 1871, 5; *Bell's Life and Sporting Chronicle*, June 29, 1872, 8.

⁶ *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, June 22, 1872, 5; July 6, 1872, 12; July 27, 1872, 5; August 3, 1872, 5.

⁷ *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, June 14, 1873, 9; *Boston Daily Globe*, July 24, 1905, 14.

these events mirrored the exhibition matches which were popular in the 1860s that were fuelled by gambling, a major problem for amateur committees.⁸

By 1874, at the age of 27, Robinson had moved away from athletics and attended veterinary school in Edinburgh, Scotland,⁹ but his passion for sport continued into his adulthood, competing for New York Athletics Club in 1883 as an amateur walker and rower.

3. ROBINSON THE TRAINER

The death of his father in February 1878 made Robinson re-evaluate his career path,¹⁰ accepting a job with Henry Hilton, the millionaire New York judge, at his stables in Saratoga Springs, the summer destination for many of New York's elite.¹¹ Robinson resided in Saratoga Springs whilst fulfilling his new position at the Saratoga Race Course but his passion for athletics never faltered and he quickly took the position of trainer to Harlem Athletic Club, established in 1876 as an inclusive amateur organisation for those striving for athletic excellence.¹² Migration of athletic trainers to foreign countries was practiced as the Amateur Athletic Association imposed new rules, limiting their association with professional trainers who were previously fundamental to the survival of athletic competitions. Those requiring employment in the athletic profession either migrated sports, for example to football, horseracing and cricket, or moved abroad.

Robinson's success at the Harlem AC contributed to his appointment at Harvard University in 1881, although similar athletic ruling to the AAA regarding the use of professional trainers and imposed by Harvard's faculty, saw his position unsecure.¹³ Reporting their disgust in the treatment of Robinson and the faculty's poor decisions regarding athletics at the university, the Harvard student body rallied against the exclusion of professional trainers, which the administrators openly detested. With the new rules being debated by many Ivy League institutions, Robinson found himself without work so returned to England, engaging in the cattle shipping business whilst being in discussions with Princeton University for a summer 1883 appointment.

Although new concerns arose regarding his eligibility under the new athletic ruling,¹⁴ in October 1885 Robinson retained his Princeton position, being paid \$750 (approximately \$18,000 by today's calculations) split equally between the Princeton undergrads and alumni alike. Continuing in his role as athletic trainer

⁸ *Sporting Gazette*, October 17, 1874, 976.

⁹ *Boston Daily Globe*, July 24, 1905, 14; *New York Times*, March 20, 1906, n.p.

¹⁰ *Manchester Times*, February 9, 1878, 8; *Death Registry*, William Robinson, Chorlton, March 1873, 8c, 454.

¹¹ Stephen N. Elias, *Alexander T. Stewart: the Forgotten Merchant Prince* (London: Praeger, 1992): 159.

¹² Pamela Cooper, *The American Marathon* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 13; Paul S. Marshall, *King of the Peds* (Milton Keynes: AuthorHouse, 2010), 170.

¹³ *Harvard Crimson*, November 3, 1882, n.p.

¹⁴ *Harvard Crimson*, February 28, 1884, n.p.

to the football, baseball and athletic teams, 'Professor Robinson' provided the skills to help Princeton finish both the 1885 and 1889 football season as champions and securing his employment for the foreseeable future.¹⁵ In 1888, with an increased salary,¹⁶ Robinson took the additional responsibility of preparing the Princeton preparatory school athletics, identifying suitable talent for the university teams for the following academic year.¹⁷ The physical educators were unhappy with this arrangement, suggesting that the trainer's presence at schools (and some colleges) provided an environment where knowledge was disregarded and the 'evils of professionalism' reigned.

External organisations sought after Robinson's athletic expertise and in 1890 he was appointed head trainer and director of the Manhattan Athletic Club (MAC) at their newly constructed clubhouse in New York City.¹⁸ Offering a salary 'three times as large' as that of Princeton, the job was one he could not refuse, making him the highest paid trainer.¹⁹ His expertise was used to train champion athletes including Luther Carey, Walter C. Dohm,²⁰ and Alfred B. George, brother of professional runner Walter G. George, 'mile champion of America' and later manager to the British Olympic team.²¹ Additionally, Robinson was requested by the backers of pugilist John L. Sullivan to help prepare him for his championship battle in 1892.²² His position at the MAC ended in 1893 when news of his previous employer Judge Hilton's illness saw him return to Saratoga Springs to run Woodlawn Park, Hilton's 500-acre pleasure grounds,²³ taking the position of superintendent to Woodlawn Park Kennels and Stock Farm,²⁴ and head of the Saratoga Athletic Club. Robinson became responsible for the numerous animals stabled by Hilton as well as all athletic entertainments at the newly constructed Woodlawn Oval, a superior athletic complex, which included a cinder running and trotting track, baseball diamond, tennis courts, croquet grounds, throwing circles, and grand clubhouse.

Although complacent in his position at Woodlawn Oval, Robinson's services were still sought after by various athletics organisations, when in 1893 and 1896, Hilton loaned out Robinson to different University Athletic Associations. However, he continued to return to Saratoga until Hilton's death on August 24th, 1899,²⁵ when the Woodlawn estate went into administration.²⁶ Less than two months later he was tending

¹⁵ *Daily Princetonian*, February 24, 1886, 1; February 28, 1900, 1; *Sporting Life*, January 5, 1887, 5; *New York Times*, April 14, 1890, n.p.; Richard M. Hurd, *A History of Yale Athletics 1840-1888* (New Haven, CT: R.M. Hurd, 1888), 79.

¹⁶ *Daily Princetonian*, June 6, 1888, 3; December 7, 1888, 3.

¹⁷ *Daily Princetonian*, May 18, 1888.

¹⁸ George A. White, 'History of Manhattan Athletic Club', *Outing* 4 (1890): 165, 311.

¹⁹ *Daily Princetonian*, February 28, 1900, 1.

²⁰ *New York Times*, April 14, 1890, n.p.; *National Police Gazette*, October 10, 1891, 11; *Boston Daily Globe*, September 30, 1892, 2.

²¹ *Boston Daily Globe*, December 16, 1892, 15; *Manchester Evening News*, March 30, 1893, 3; Rob Hadgraft, *Beer and Brine: The Making of Walter George, Athletics' First Superstar* (London: Desert Island Books, 2006), 94.

²² *Boston Daily Globe*, August 3, 1892, 12; *Trenton Times*, October 24, 1905, 9.

²³ Charles Newhall Taintor, *Saratoga Illustrated: the Visitors Guide to Saratoga Springs* (New York: Taintor Bros., Merrill & Co., 1884), 86.

²⁴ *Directory of Saratoga Springs* (1895), 274; (1896), 314.

²⁵ *New York Times*, August 25, 1889, n.p.

to the Yale football team in New Haven, Connecticut, imposing a new regime of walking, punting, handling and tactical work.²⁷ With the resignation of Walter Christie, Princeton's track and field specialist and Olympic trainer,²⁸ the Princeton athletic advisory committee were keen to re-engage Robinson,²⁹ with his family moving back to the Nassau campus in August 1900.³⁰ His preparations for the football and baseball teams began immediately with food inspections and general conditioning.³¹ The training table was an important component of Robinson's regime,³² where the trainer would prepare meals for the athletes and reminisce on sporting success, being fundamental to the morale and cohesion of the team.

Secured for all athletic disciplines,³³ Robinson was an all-round trainer who looked out for the player's wellbeing and provided sound technical advice.³⁴ On match day, he would run onto the field with numerous assistants carrying water buckets and sponges 'to freshen up a tired player', then afterwards he would rub down the men, taking care of aches and pains through traditional massage techniques.³⁵ However, with structural changes in place from 1901, Robinson was sidelined as the "coachers", comprised of university graduates, took charge. The re-development of the coaching role saw more responsibilities granted to these individuals, specialists in tactical awareness and individual sporting techniques, who absorbed the traditional training responsibilities and redistributed them to medical professionals rather than unqualified individuals. Although their presence was not yet felt, the movement towards educated persons in the coaching role marginalised the trainer's position within university sport, contributing in a turn towards professionalism that amateur organisations had previously fought.

4. ROBINSON THE ENTREPRENEUR

After his first successful season at Princeton, Robinson used his new found status to announce his athletic entertainments, offering, 'at his own expense', to lay a track dedicated to exhibitions of running, vaulting and leaping similar to the travelling pedestrian fairs popular in mid-nineteenth century England.³⁶ Robinson's athletic connections meant the event was filled with American and English sporting celebrities,

²⁶ *New York Times*, August 21, 1904, 10.

²⁷ *New York Times*, November 16, 1899, n.p.; November 18, 1899, n.p.; November 21, 1899, n.p.; *Boston Evening Transcript*, November 21, 1899, 6.

²⁸ Frank Presbrey and James H. Moffatt, *Athletics at Princeton – A History* (New York: Frank Presbury Co., 1901), 443, 447, 453.

²⁹ *New York Times*, February 27, 1900, n.p.; *Daily Princetonian*, February 28, 1900, 1.

³⁰ *Directory of Saratoga Springs* (1900), 311; Frank Presbrey and James H. Moffatt, *Athletics at Princeton – A History* (New York: Frank Presbury Co., 1901), 456; *New Jersey State Census, 1905* (228/11/9/1699616).

³¹ *New York Times*, August 5, 1901, 6.

³² *Boston Daily Globe*, September 23, 1903, 9.

³³ *Daily Princetonian*, February 12, 1901, 1.

³⁴ William H. Edwards, *Football Days* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 306-307.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 245, 253-254, 461; *Daily True American*, October 27, 1902, 6; *Manufacturers and Farmers Journal*, November 16, 1903, 1.

³⁶ *Daily Princetonian*, February 15, 1886, 2.

and students could attend, for a cost of 75 cents, with the exhibition being the most sort after spectacle of the athletic calendar.³⁷ Robinson became starter, judge and timekeeper to the multiple events being held,³⁸ as well as facilitator of rowing and promoter of horseracing when appointed at Woodlawn Park,³⁹ taking on a role similar to that of the professional English sporting entrepreneur of the 1860s.⁴⁰ Robinson attention to detail was applauded,⁴¹ and his status was again elevated when the Amateur Athletic Union invited him to join the committee to oversee plans regarding their athletic meetings.⁴²

Robinson's name was used in nationwide campaigns to endorse Allcock's Porous Plasters 'for cuts, bruises, strains, rheumatism and colds',⁴³ and his column in the *World* provided an additional platform to display his methods and discuss his views on athletics, contributing in his increasing status as a pioneering trainer.⁴⁴

Additionally, in 1888, Robinson penned new rules for football, similar to that of the British Rugby, providing a system that would generally improve the safety of the game.⁴⁵ Robinson's rules were considered and the fifteen-man version of the game was introduced to the American colleges, albeit not to huge success. Nonetheless, this provides a new dimension to Robinson's persona as one of influential authority in the development of collegiate sport.

5. ROBINSON - FRIEND OR FOE?

The temperament of the trainer was important in instilling team cohesion and ambition, and reports of Robinson's personality were always that of positivity. Known for his jovial nature, with 'pride and pleasure apparent in every line of his face',⁴⁶ Robinson provided the perfect balance of fun and comfort that encouraged his athletes to perform. His funeral was a prime example of how he had touched so many hearts, with the pallbearers consisting of new and old Princeton athletes, many making the trip from out of town to send off 'Dear Old Jim'.⁴⁷ Even with his contentious relationship with Mike Murphy, the Pennsylvanian trainer attended and offered 'interesting and touching experiences of Jim's career'.⁴⁸

³⁷ *Daily Princetonian*, February 24, 1886, 4; March 1, 1886, 3.

³⁸ *The News*, July 3, 1893, 1; *New York Times*, September 10, 1893, n.p.

³⁹ *New York Times*, August 5, 1894, n.p.; July 13, 1895, n.p.; July 21, 1895, n.p.; June 20, 1897, n.p.

⁴⁰ Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, 'George Martin, "Wizard of Pedestrianism" and Manchester's Sporting Entrepreneur', *Sporting Lives*, ed. David Day (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University Press, 2011), 142-166.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, July 29, 1894, n.p.

⁴² *New York Times*, July 13, 1894, n.p.

⁴³ *Sacramento Daily Union*, March 26, 1886, 4; *Huron Daily Huronite*, December 19, 1890, 4; *Logansport Journal*, July 22, 1893, 3.

⁴⁴ *Daily Princetonian*, November 3, 1886, 3.

⁴⁵ *Daily Princetonian*, January 7, 1889, 3; *Sporting Life*, January 17, 1889, 8; *Boston Daily Globe*, January 21, 1889, 6.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, October 31, 1889, 2; November 17, 1889, 5.

⁴⁷ *New York Daily Tribune*, March 23, 1906, 10; *New York Times*, March 23, 1906, n.p.; William H. Edwards, *Football Days* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 310.

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, March 23, 1906, n.p.; William H. Edwards, *Football Days* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 310.

Reports continue that 'Robinson was well liked...a hearty, whole souled man and always willing to do favours for his friends...popular because he deserved to be'.⁴⁹ His rapport with the Harvard eleven, who were without a professional trainer in the late 1880s, saw his attendance at their football games where he 'stood by and directed his boys', and his loyalty to Princeton saw his enjoyment in preparing the field for their Thanksgiving Day matches, even when employed by other organisations. His Lancashire dialect was part of his amusement, being the talking point around many training tables.⁵⁰ According the Edwards, 'the trainer is a friend and adviser', both qualities that Robinson possessed.⁵¹

However, Bill Reid, Harvard's trainer, paints a different picture, that of a envious man who would react under pressure, recalling 'the great jealousy between [Jack] McMasters and Robinson, and the latter's absolute unwillingness to place himself at a disadvantage to McMasters such as he felt he would by placing himself in if he understood to advise me', with other trainers cautious of his wild tongue.⁵² His need for success saw him break rules on several occasions, which would have harmed the athletic integrity of his employers should it be found,⁵³ although the practice of offering incentives was wide spread amongst the university sporting population, with Murphy and Reid himself offering rewards for athletic security. Edwards sums up his character in the following anecdote as one of true fighting spirit but humorous to his core:

Princeton men cannot help feeling that Moffat should have been allowed a goal against Yale in his Post-graduate year of '84, which was called before the full halves had been played and decided a draw. Princeton claimed it but the Referee said he didn't see it, which caused Moffat to exclaim something. Quite a number of years after Jim Robinson who was trainer of the Princeton team in '84, went down to the dock to see his brother off for Europe. Looking up he beheld on the deck above, the man who had refereed the '84 game, and whom he had not seen since, "Smith," he said, "I have a brother on this boat, but I still hope she sinks".⁵⁴

6. CONCLUSIONS AND ADDITIONAL LAYERS

Robinson's death to heart disease in March 1906, a condition from which he suffered from 1903, changed the attitude towards the all-round trainer in Princeton history. Although his responsibilities had considerably lessened in the years leading to his death, with Al Copeland, formally Robinson's athlete at the

⁴⁹ *Sun*, April 2, 1906, 5.

⁵⁰ William H. Edwards, *Football Days* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 311.

⁵¹ William H. Edwards, *Football Days* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 306-307.

⁵² Ronald A. Smith, ed., *Big-Time Football at Harvard, 1905: the Diary of Coach Bill Reid* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 49-50.

⁵³ Ronald A. Smith, ed., *Big-Time Football at Harvard, 1905: the Diary of Coach Bill Reid* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 50, 72-73.

⁵⁴ William H. Edwards, *Football Days* (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 187.

MAC, taking control of athletics from 1905, and Val Flood providing his services for the Varsity football in 1906, his presence at sporting events and his general ambiance around campus lifted student spirits, with the *Daily Princetonian* concluding, 'we have suffered a loss so severe and lasting...and whose place cannot be filled'. His career was one of esteem which has been lost in American sporting literature, I suspect partially due to his British heritage in an nationalistic society, and partially due to his untimely death as many sporting biographies of 'great American trainers' surround those who postdate WWI. In presenting Robinson's story and uncovering the complex interconnections and dimensions to his sporting career, this paper identifies the need for further de-construction of sporting biography, as well as identification of those lost individuals who shaped the sporting landscape of the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods. Many other layers need to be considered, including Robinson the family man, Robinson the politician, Robinson the pioneer and Robinson the loyal, all contributing towards the memory of 'America's first professional college trainer'.