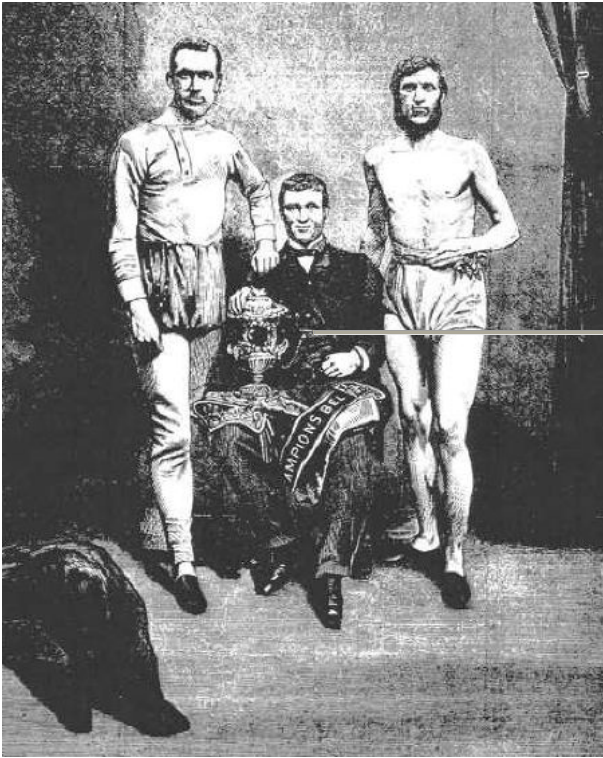


How Failsworth became the athletics capital of the UK. *Manchester Evening News, (June 02, 2011), p. 9.*



*Household name: George Martin from the book *Front Runners: The First Athletic Track Champions 1857-1875* by Warren Roe.*

As people find out if they got tickets for the Olympics, Paul Taylor uncovers a chapter of English sporting history we've forgotten – the era when a pub on Oldham Road was the centre of UK athletics...

IT was a time when the sport of "pedestrianism" was fostered by the pubs and athletes trained on stale beer. In the days before the Amateur Athletic Association, the athletes of the mid-19th century did what they did for cash. And, for a brief time, one of the most prestigious arenas in the world was a running track at the Royal Oak, a pub in Oldham Road, Failsworth.

When William Lang and William Richards ran the Royal Oak mile in the 20,000-capacity arena near the pub, they finished neck and neck in four mins 17 seconds, a

national record that stood for 15 years.

But by then, George Martin, who had laid out this field of dreams, made himself a household name on the strength of his sporting exploits, was in a posh lunatic asylum, close to death.

This little known chapter of athletics history is the subject of research by Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, a lecturer in sport history at Manchester Metropolitan University's Crewe campus.

In the days of the industrial revolution, the pubs were where men went to slake their thirst after a day in the factory and to escape the foul conditions of their own homes. This was an age before football, and those pubs would be hubs not just for games such as skittles but also rabbit coursing, pigeon shooting and pedestrianism – foot racing on roads or tracks.

Six-day events would be organised with prizes for the longest distance covered. Feats of endurance were encouraged by the likes of Captain Barclay who in 1809 won a 1,000-guinea wager by walking 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours on Newmarket Heath.

"Nobody was doing it for fitness. The idea of fitness did not come about until the 20th century," says Oldfield. "People were doing it for the money."

George Martin was a shoemaker by trade, but better known as a hurdler and sprinter in the 1840s. He lived with his trainer Ned Smith, who ran a pub in Regent Street, London.

Manchester was a hive of activity for running events, and Martin came here and stay at the Old White Lion pub in Long Millgate, Manchester, run by James Holden, the great stake-holder of Lancashire pedestrianism. There Martin met Holden's daughter Alice and they married in 1853.

Martin became a trainer with his own stable of athletes, and in 1861, he took these sportsmen to the US to race. In New York, Martin spotted Deerfoot, a 6ft 2in Native American runner.

Martin brought Deerfoot back to Britain, and put him in exhibition races to which thousands would come. There was a whiff of the freak show about them, as Martin had Deerfoot act the savage, dressed in feathers, mocassins and warpaint, whooping wildly while Martin pretended to calm him down.

"He started an exhibition called the Deerfoot Circus which saw Deerfoot and George's athletes touring the UK in a huge tent with a collapsible running track," says Oldfield.

The 19th century version of athletic training would be very different from that of today.

"They would do something called 'sweating and purging'," says Oldfield. "They would wrap athletes up in front of a fire and sweat all the impurities out of them. They would brush the body with a hard brush to make sure the toxins did not sink back into the skin.

"The diet would be strict, consisting of red meat, no potatoes, no vegetables. You were not to drink water, because it was so poor then what with cholera and the like, but athletes were allowed one or two glasses of stale ale and, before bed, a little bit of porter."

In 1863, Martin and his wife took over the Royal Oak pub and, in the 20 acres of land around it, created an enclosed running track, horse trotting course and wrestling arena.

"It was probably one of the best in the world – a very state of the art running ground," says Oldfield. "Athletes would challenge someone and articles of agreement would be drawn up, with most events run for money. There were also championship events. Every year, Martin did the Royal Oak Mile competition, which attracted customers.

"There was an invited field of runners from all over the country, so it was like a national athletics championship. The arena held 20,000, but there are reports that so many people flocked to the area they couldn't hold people back and many got in for free."

In that dead heat in the 1865 Royal Oak Mile, the winners Lang and Richards were both landlords of Manchester pubs. They planned to settle the deadlock with a road race between their pubs, but the decider never came off.

But all of this was lost on Martin, who by this time was already institutionalised with what may have been bipolar disorder, and died, aged 39, in November 1865.

His former athletes helped Martin's widow to run the pub and running ground, but in 1872 it closed. Today, there is no memorial in Failsworth to Martin's grand vision, and only the occasional regular at the Royal Oak knows anything about the pub's illustrious place in sporting history.