

James Robinson, from Mancunian Butcher to American College Trainer

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Figure 1: James "Jim" Robinson c.1895
Princeton University Archive

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 American 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. This poster 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.

History is a social science which considers 'events' and 'facts' of the past in the present, and does so through constantly evolving theories and methodologies. Historical research is a contested arena, as historical knowledge is continually developing and there is no set structure to the way it should be recorded. 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.

'Lives and their experiences are represented as stories. They are like pictures that have been painted over, and, when the paint is scraped off an old picture, something new becomes visible...There is no truth in the painting of life, only multiple images and traces of what has been, what could have been, and what is now.'

Robinson the Athlete

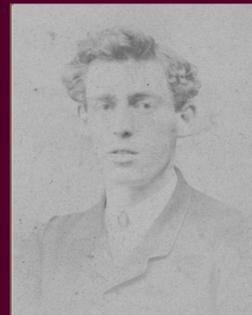


Figure 2: James Robinson c. 1868
Private Family Collection

James Robinson was born in 1846 in Failsworth, Manchester, to Martha Worsick and William Robinson, a working-class butcher from Glossop. 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. However, Robinson's walking caused much controversy in the press, with many believing his style to be 'unfair', and his defiance unfathomable, whilst other found his competitions well contested and in good form. 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, Paticroft, and Haslingden, 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. 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 these events mirrored the exhibition matches which were popular in the 1860s that were fuelled by gambling, a major problem for amateur committees.

The death of his father in February 1878 made Robinson re-evaluate his career path, 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. 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. 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 insecure. 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, 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 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. In 1888, with an increased salary, Robinson took the additional responsibility of preparing the Princeton preparatory school athletics, identifying suitable talent for the university teams for the following academic year. 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.



Figure 4: Princeton University Track Team 1888
Athletics at Princeton - A History (1901), p. 420

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, when the Woodlawn estate went into administration.

Key References: Historical Newspapers including *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, *Daily Princetonian*, *Harvard Crimson*, *Manchester Times*, *New York Times*, *Sporting Gazette*; Historical Trade Directories; Genealogical Records including 1851, 1861, 1871 England Census, 1885, 1905 New Jersey State Census, 1900 US Census, New York Passenger Lists 1820-1957, England Births and Christenings 1538-1975, New Jersey Births and Christenings 1660-1980, New Jersey Marriages, New Jersey Death Registry, John Bale, Mette K. Christensen and Gertrud Pfister (Eds.), *Writing Lives in Sport: Biographies, Life-Histories and Methods* (Oxford: Aarhus University Press, 2010); Dave Day (Ed.), *Sports and Coaching* (Manchester: MMU IPR, 2012).

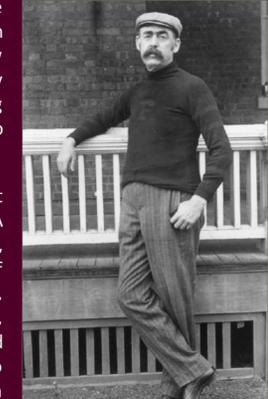


Figure 3: James Robinson c.1900
Historical Society of Princeton

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. 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. His expertise was used to train champion athletes including Luther Carey, Walter C. Dohm, and Alfred B. George, brother of professional runner Walter G. George, 'mile champion of America' and later manager to the British Olympic team. 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, taking the position of superintendent to Woodlawn Park Kennels and Stock Farm, and head of the Saratoga Athletic Club.

Less than two months later he was tending to the Yale football team in New Haven, Connecticut, imposing a new regime of walking, punting, handling and tactical work. With the resignation of Walter Christie, Princeton's track and field specialist and Olympic trainer, the Princeton athletic advisory committee were keen to re-engage Robinson, with his family moving back to the Nassau campus in August 1900. His preparations for the football and baseball teams began immediately with food inspections and general conditioning. The training table was an important component of Robinson's regime, 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, Robinson was an all-round trainer who looked out for the player's wellbeing and provided sound technical advice. 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. 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.

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

Robinson's name was used in nationwide campaigns to endorse Allcock's Porous Plasters 'for cuts, bruises, strains, rheumatism and colds', 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. 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. 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.

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, his presence at sporting events and his general ambience 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 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'.



Figure 5: John DeWitt, Jim Robinson & Forest G. Pearson 1903
American Photo Archive

