

Athletic Training in Nineteenth Britain: From Fad and Quackery to Credible Exercise Science

Scott A.G.M. Crawford
George Mason University

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, athletic training in Great Britain was a curious mish-mash of fadism and quackery leavened with common sense conditioning principles that would be both tenable and appropriate in the 1980s. For example, Tom Cribb during his preparation for the 1811 World Heavyweight Championship fight with the American Tom Molyneux, took part in a series of “sweats”. This entailed the drinking of a “sweating” liquor, being covered with six or eight pairs of blankets in a feather-bed for a half-hour which was then followed by a vigorous massage. Such a training device, if employed today, would be perceived as idiosyncratic and eccentric. However, at the same time in history the noted pedestrian Captain Barclay walked one thousand miles (virtually the distance from Lands End to John O’Groats) in one thousand consecutive hours and accomplished the feat tired, but far from being either exhausted or disabled. His training regimen of walking (and sometimes running) literally hundreds of miles a week was a forerunner to the “breakthrough” distance training advocated by Arthur Lydiard of New Zealand and the aerobics work of Dr. Kenneth Cooper in the U.S.A. during the 1960s.

During the nineteenth century in Victorian Britain there was the evolution and development of modern sport. Athletic biographies, sporting newspaper accounts, historical treatises and even works of fiction (see Wilkie Collins and his extensive comments on track and field conditioning in *Man and Wife*) provided recipes, training tips and devices to improve athletic performance. The influence and impact of Charles Darwin and the publication of his *Origin of Species* (1859) had a profound influence on human concepts of life and exercise. Peter McIntosh’s chapters on “athleticism” in his seminal study *Sport in Society* (1963) provide rich sources on changing views regarding exercise and the body-see, for example, Newman, Arnold, Kingsley, Hughes and Kipling. The contribution of Bruce Haley’s *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (1978) to the study of nineteenth century sport is a monumental one.

This essay represents an attempt to chart the changing views on the nature of athletic training and the development of a “modern” credible exercise science by the beginning of the twentieth century. Primary sources to be utilized are Sir John Sinclair’s *Athletic Exercises* (1806); W. Thorn, *Pedestrianism* (1813); P. H. Clias, *Gymnastic Exercises to Develop and Improve the Physical Powers of Man* (1825); another Sinclair source, *Code of Health and Longevity* (1829); “Craven’s” *Manly Exercises* (1843); Rev. J. G. Wood and others, *Athletic Sports* (1864); Archibald Maclaren’s, *A System of Physical Education* (1869); Tom Connors; *The Modern Athlete* (1890); F. A. Schmidt and E. H. Miles, *The Training of the Body* (1902); E. H. Miles, *Muscle, Brain and Diet* (1901); E. F. Benson and E. H. Miles, *Daily Training*

(1902). Even towards the end of the nineteenth century such questionable devices as purging, cold water immersion and a sponge both of whisky and water prior to competition were recommended. Nevertheless a number of sources documented the emergence of scientific principles and procedures in training. Two sources highly recommended for future analyses are *Athletics and Kindred Sport* (1902) by W. G. George and *Running and Training* (1902) by E. C. Bredin. George, essentially a distance runner, advocated short runs for speed, longer runs for stamina and the necessity for regular recorded time trials. Bredin's revolutionary approach included year round conditioning and stop watch precision, in a daily interval run program. He commented "a great number of men suffer defeat through being under rather than over trained".