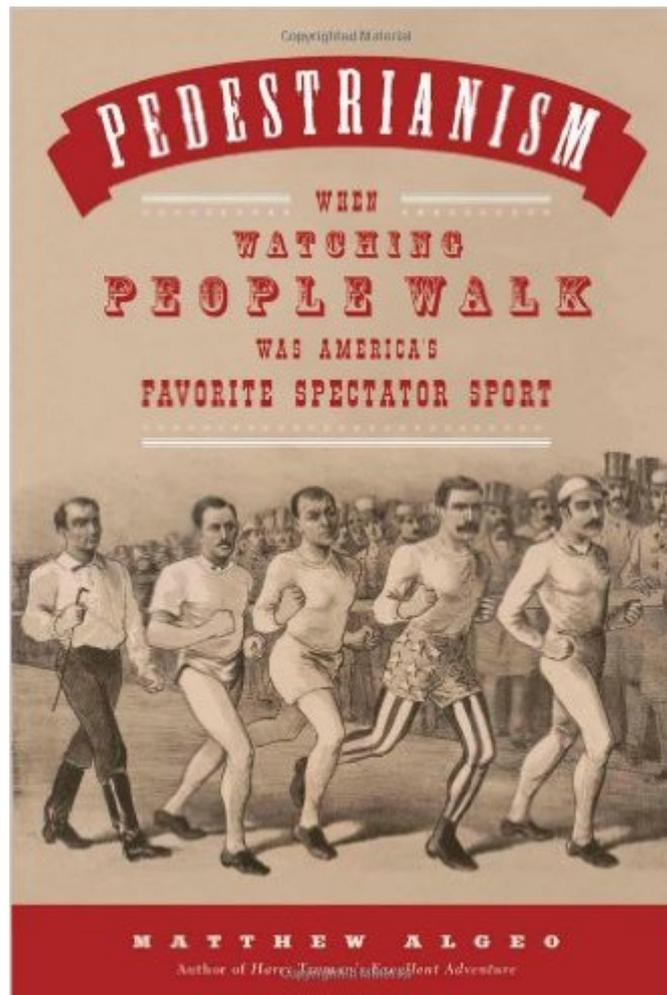


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Pedestrianism: When Watching People Walk Was America's Favorite Spectator Sport



Synopsis

Strange as it sounds, during the 1870s and 1880s, America's most popular spectator sport wasn't baseball, boxing, or horseracing—it was competitive walking. Inside sold-out arenas, competitors walked around dirt tracks almost nonstop for six straight days (never on Sunday), risking their health and sanity to see who could walk the farthest—500 miles, then 520 miles, and 565 miles! These walking matches were as talked about as the weather, the details reported from coast to coast. This long-forgotten sport, known as pedestrianism, spawned America's first celebrity athletes and opened doors for immigrants, African Americans, and women. The top pedestrians earned a fortune in prize money and endorsement deals. But along with the excitement came the inevitable scandals, charges of doping—cocaine leaves!—and insider gambling. It even spawned a riot in 1879 when too many fans showed up at New York's Gilmore's Garden, later renamed Madison Square Garden, and were denied entry to a widely publicized showdown. *Pedestrianism: When Watching People Walk Was America's Favorite Spectator Sport* chronicles competitive walking's peculiar appeal and popularity, its rapid demise, and its enduring influence, and how pedestrianism marked the beginning of modern spectator sports in the United States.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Pedestrianism — “*When Watching People Walk Was America's Favorite Spectator Sport* is a fascinating read about a little known part of 19th century American history. It's hard to believe

that before baseball, bicycle racing, or boxing gained prominence, the most popular spectator sport in America, and to a lesser degree England, was watching people walk on a circular track for days on end (usually six as the Sabbath was more strictly observed in those days). This book is excellent recounting of this oddity in American history. Algeo documents well the staggering toll the races took on the participants. The winners of the six day matches would walk as much as 600+ miles. Many of the people in attendance at these events were there to watch the pedestrians suffer, more than to enjoy a sporting event. The author is adept at drawing out the parallels with today's modern celebrity sports culture. The stars of the sport were known nationwide and received front page coverage from the newspapers. Pedestrianism had its version of a drug scandal involving the chewing of coca leaves rather than today's taking of PEDs. And as the sport was a favorite of gamblers, it had its fair share of race fixing scandals. There are several larger than life characters that the author is excellent at bringing to life and exploring their significance. Daniel O'Leary was an Irish immigrant and his successes made him a hero of the immigrant communities across the nation. Likewise, Frank Hart, an African American, was a hero to his community as well. One other aspect of the book that I enjoyed was the historical background provided by the author.

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