

Finding My Way: Walking as Research in Sports History

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Abstract

In 2006, I walked the route of the 1908 London Olympic Marathon as part of a research project on the city's Olympic history. With this physical act of research and recovery, I aimed to make the route itself more well-known as a site in local history. The physical nature of the research was a new departure for me. In this personal, reflexive article, I revisit the project to explore my motivations, methods and the impact that the walk had on my practice as a sports historian.

One Saturday morning in September 2006, I got off a train at Windsor and Eton Riverside, a small station 20 miles from central London. Most of my fellow passengers were tourists, on their way to visit the town's famous Castle and immerse themselves in its royal heritage. I was there for a different kind of immersion: with my walking boots on and an overnight pack in my rucksack, I was starting a journey on foot that would take me away from Windsor on a tightly planned walk of 26 miles and 385 yards—or as close to this as was possible—to recover the route of the 1908 Olympic Marathon. I was self-consciously putting myself in the footsteps of the 55 men who has started that race on the lawn of Windsor Castle 98 years earlier.

The walk was part of a bigger project I was developing on the history of London's Olympic Games. With the centenary of the 1908 Olympics approaching, it was obvious that there would be plenty of historical interest come 2008. This interest was likely to be enhanced thanks to the fact that in 2005, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had named London as the host city for the 2012 Olympics. Suddenly, London was set to jump from being one of four cities to have held the Olympic Games twice to being the first one to hold it three times. In this context, the centenary year of 2008 was likely to be a boom time for sports historians working on those first Games, held in the purpose-built White City Stadium and at other venues around the capital and outside London. I wanted to be part of this, but I was keen to do something that I felt would be less predictable than a history of the Games, and that would enhance our understanding of the local history of this international event. So here I stood, fresh off the train at Windsor and Eton Riverside, ready to undertake my first experiment in embodied historical research.

I chose the 1908 Marathon as my focus for three reasons: one was linked to the race's history, one was about my own career and professional development, and one related to my personal and local history. First came the history, based on the race's fame and its importance in the history of athletics. Since it was introduced at the first Olympics, those held at Athens in 1896, the marathon has provided a space for the best male distance runners in the world to showcase their ability and press for triumph. The IOC finally admitted women to this prestigious event in 1984.^[1] Together, these races are among the marquee events of the modern Olympic Games,

and they have inspired city races across the world that, every year, bring tens of thousands of amateur runners to test their endurance, stamina and resilience in what Christopher Brasher, one of the founders of the London Marathon in 1981, called the “great suburban Everest”.^[2] The marathon distance is random, unlike most distances in modern athletics that work to efficient and round numbers in the metric system. Odd in both imperial and metric systems, the marathon covers 26 miles and 385 yards or 42.2 kilometres.

It was this fact that drew me to Windsor that day, as this distance was the one that had first been run at the 1908 Olympic Games. At that time, there was no set distance for the Olympic marathon—the Olympic regulation, as approved by the British Olympic Council in February 1908, was simply that it should be a foot race of “about 25 miles (about 40 kilometres)”.^[3] The route that the Polytechnic Harriers devised for London’s Olympic organisers, including some last-minute changes to increase the runners’ comfort at the start and finish of the race, ended up at the now-famous distance. The race proved to be the most popular event in these moderately successful Olympics, with thousands of people lining the streets to watch it and the stadium packed to capacity. Those in sight of the track saw high drama when the leading runner, Dorando Pietri of Italy, entered the stadium in a state of exhaustion. He collapsed on the track and crossed the finish line only thanks to the officials’ physical help. John Hayes of the USA, who finished 32 seconds later, rightly appealed against the help that Pietri had received, and he was subsequently promoted to the gold medal position. Both runners then turned professional and raced each other again over the London distance.^[4] The distance itself stuck, and while the next two Olympic marathons—those at Stockholm in 1912 and Antwerp in 1920—were run over different distances, the International Amateur Athletics Federation decided in 1921 to make 26 miles 385 yards the permanent standard. It has stood at every Olympics since Paris 1924 and is the regulated distance for every city marathon worldwide. It was my desire to recover that original route and thus the origin of this distance that inspired my journey.

My personal reasons for walking this route were varied, and it is fair to say that I had not rationalised them all when I made those first steps away from Windsor Castle. Seventeen years on, *PARSE Journal* has given me the opportunity to revisit the walk through the lens of solitary movement, embodiment, risk-taking and creative thinking, which is helping to make matters clearer. The walk was my first experiment in embodied historical research, where I engaged physically in the specific site of my subject matter. This was more than field work: covering, on foot, the same route and the same distance as the runners 98 years earlier was an act of empathy, physicality and sensory engagement. Ideally, I would have done the job properly and run it, but my creaking knees were not up to the distance, so I settled on walking as the next best thing. I embraced this means of motion as, unlike running, walking would give me more time to feel the route, to look for traces of anything that might have survived from the time of the race, and to make connections between the archival evidence and the physical space through which those athletes had moved. As a walker, my empathy with the runners was obviously constrained by the fact that my journey was tiring but never taxing or exhausting, but it was the best that I could do. I completed the route at a comfortable pace over two days, with a bed and breakfast stop close to the halfway point at Ruislip. So why did I want to do it? How does the walk look now as an exercise in personal and professional development?

The starting point was professional and I have hinted at it already: I wanted to do something with the 1908 Olympics that other historians might not be thinking about. But there was more to it than this. My embodied research was about changing my usual practice as a historian, and about trying to break with some of the conventions of the Sports Science department in which I was working at the time. As a historian, I had always tended to work broadly within the tradition of empirical historical research as it had grown out of the scientific history movement of the late nineteenth century. My early research in sports history, dating back to my PhD which I completed in 1991, was all about politics. I was interested in the ways in which British governments had

used sport for diplomatic reasons. My primary materials were all documents, predominantly sources created by the British Foreign Office and stored in the UK's National Archives (formerly the Public Record Office). I also worked as a historical research assistant for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Foreign Office's successor body, in the latter stages of my PhD, and was thus informed by an institutional culture of upholding the primacy of the political archive over all other sources. I was, of course, dutifully aware of the shortcomings and silences of diplomatic records, but these sources remained my focus. I thought about lines on maps only in terms of national borders as they applied to diplomatic dialogues, and I rarely concerned myself with the exact places in which the sporting events I researched took place. My interest in the Berlin Olympic Games of 1936, for example, was all about high-level decisions on possible boycotts and diplomatic representation, and not on the stadium's location in the suburbs or how it fitted in with the German capital's cityscape. My work on the archives at this point entailed a purely intellectual engagement. I walked to the archives and libraries from local railway stations, and wandered the shelves when I needed to, but there was nothing physical or embodied about what I did with the material: my engagement with the primary evidence was all in my head.

Once I moved into teaching in a university History department, however, I gradually shifted my focus to local and community history, and thus to a sense of place in the past. This shift started in my local history classes with extra-mural students. While my starting point in these classes was often about making links between the localities on which the students were working and the wider national and global contexts, I increasingly found myself drawn to the specific histories of cities, towns and villages. I could soon own the mantra that "all history is local history". However, this did not impact my research, most of which stayed focused on political and organisational histories of sport, or on large-scale social histories that did not get too close to the specifics of place. The key shift in my career that pushed me towards the unusual act of researching history through some kind of physical engagement came when I left History and moved to Sport Studies. I have written elsewhere about the opportunities and challenges of this shift, and of the huge amounts I learned from being the outlier Humanities scholar in a team of physiologists, psychologists and colleagues focused on business, management or leadership.^[6] But part of that outlier status was that I could choose not to conform to the scientific paradigm that dominated the department's culture. This led me to gently kick out, to be a quiet but persistent rebel, where I encouraged like-minded students to take risks in designing eclectic and interpretivist projects based on History and Cultural Studies. It behoved me, then, to apply the same approach myself, and by the mid-2000s I was thinking of research and writing projects that could be quirky and unpredictable, and that might involve intellectual risks.

The slow turn in my teaching towards the local, and my desire to work on something that would be as far from a scientific paradigm as possible, came together when I started work on a large project on the history and heritage of the Olympic Games, and their Olimpick and Olympian predecessors in Britain.^[6] The turn in my work became a massive swerve. With leading sports architecture and heritage expert Simon Inglis as my editor and mentor, and with John Bale's seminal works on the geography of sport as a guide,^[7] I started using maps, visual records and field work as ways to understand how these events, and the places in which they took place, made sense in their landscapes and townscapes. I also needed to see what these events had left behind, and what else from their time had survived or been replaced. At this time, I was reading some psychogeography literature, particularly Iain Sinclair's *Orbital, Lights Out for the Territory* (2002) and *Edge of the Orison* (2006).^[8] I took his advice as something of a guide: "Walking is the best way to explore and exploit the city [. . .] Drifting purposefully is the recommended mode, tramping asphalted earth in alert reverie, allowing the fiction of an underlying pattern to reveal itself."^[9] Here was the basis for my marathon walk. As I was working on an exact and well-documented walk, I could not allow too much "drifting", but Sinclair's search for "underlying patterns" proved to be a significant motivation. I became keen to make connections over time, to look for coincidences, echoes and

resonances between the spaces that Pietri, Hayes and the others had run through and the route's same spaces a century later. I envisaged the walk as a solitary activity, outside the normal traditions of my archival work. I wanted my physical commitment to offer me a degree of empathy with the runners, and I hoped to have the time, space and calm to find out more about the course than the primary sources from 1908 could offer from their sanitised and regulated places in the archives.

There was, though, a final personal reason for this walk. Once I had made the decision to walk and started reading about the race, I quickly began to make personal connections that made the whole project much more intimate. The most obvious was that I was a distance runner of no great talent but some experience. Although I had never run a marathon, I had completed numerous half marathons and some longer races, including a 20 miler and some tough 16-mile mixed-terrain races when I was a student in Wales. While the marathon distance was beyond me in 2006, I knew that I could bring some kind of distance runner's sensibility to the task.

More significant was the way in which the historical route intersected with the suburban geography of my childhood and youth. I was born in 1965, 57 years after the 1908 Olympics, but my childhood home in west London was close to some of the places where the action had played out. As a child, I swam at Ruislip Lido, just off the marathon route, and my family often visited Windsor Castle for a day out. I would have known nothing about the 1908 Olympics then, but once I started my research, the resonances with my childhood's landscape began to emerge. The most important was the fact that my secondary school, which I attended from the ages of 11 to 18, was only a quarter of a mile from the then decrepit White City Stadium, and I passed it every day on my way to school. I remember Mr. Stroud, my Geography teacher, telling my class that the Olympics had once been held there. This seemed ridiculous. My Olympic knowledge at that point was drawn from watching the Munich Olympics of 1972 and those at Montreal four years later on television, and those cities' ultra-modern stadiums were a world away from the crumbling concrete and rusting iron that I saw from the top deck of the 72 bus. Once I started researching the 1908 Marathon route, however, I realised that the race had covered some of the ground that I had run across with my classmates and teammates on cross-country training runs and races over the open spaces of Wormwood Scrubs. Moreover, the runners in 1908 had left the Scrubs and headed towards the Stadium along Artillery Lane, the service road between Wormwood Scrubs prison and Hammersmith Hospital, which I had used to access the Scrubs for running and football matches. Finding out that I had unconsciously run in the 1908 Marathon runners' footsteps for years gave me the kind of thrill that helped to remind me why I was passionate about history. With this distant but personal link, the walk was on, my anticipation enhanced by the fact that I would then re-tread my own old running routes 23 years after leaving school.

I thus had all of these influences in my head in the mid-2000s, even if I did not recognise them all: a desire to undertake a project on the 1908 Olympics; a need to write something that would showcase History at its least scientific; a shift away from my traditional ways of working in the archives; and an urge to make some connections between my personal history and this famous race. Walking for 26 miles and 385 yards through London's rural hinterlands, satellite towns and north-western suburbs in search of an ephemeral and almost invisible racecourse was the perfect way to bring all this together.

To prepare for the walk, and to make sure I made the most of it, I had to research the 1908 race in detail. The starting point was the Official Report, which included a description of the route.^[10] Taken with the official map that the Polytechnic produced, held in the University of Westminster's Archives, this was the easy stage.^[11] More challenging was to map this original onto the contemporary landscape. Road races are ephemeral, leaving very little behind after the last runner has finished: unlike Olympic stadiums, they have no tangible legacy and this

creates a challenge for historians. Apart from the start on a private road across Windsor Castle's lawn and the closing yards on the Stadium's track, the whole course took place on public roads. Overlaying the 1908 route onto a contemporary map, I saw that most of the roads were still in place in 2006, so the course was traceable. There had been some changes over the 98 years, though, most obviously those wrought by new transport infrastructure, town centre remodelling and, of course, the demolition of the White City Stadium. By the time I came to walk it, the route was cut by two motorways—the M4 south of Slough and the M25 west of Uxbridge. Just north of the stadium site, the Westway was now a six-lane elevated road. The London Underground's Central Line also cut through the route close to the Stadium, and a new road layout in Uxbridge's town centre had destroyed the route for a short stretch. As well as the route, I noted all the named refreshment stations that had been set up for the runners in 1908, mostly outside pubs and cafés, and studied as many photographs as I could find from official Olympic documents and local and national newspapers. The short film of the Olympics made by Pathé also included a 74-second edit of the race's highlights, covering the start, a crowded street scene and the finish.^[12] With these maps and visual clues, and many written narratives, I prepared a route map. This was before the advent of smart phones, so it was a relatively crude affair: a print-out of the street map with the route marked in highlight pen and cut into manageable sections. The running website Fastest Known Times now has an excellent current version of the route, mapped by one of its members onto a live map.^[13]

When historians plan research activities, they rarely have to think about training and physical conditioning. This was a minor factor for me on this walk: I am able-bodied and my basic fitness was good. At the time, I walked on average four miles a day, either as part of my regular commute or as a simple exercise with my family. I also ran, albeit nothing longer than 10 kilometres in either training or races. So, there was no significant physical challenge here, but the very fact that I had to think about stamina reminded me how far from my usual practice this project was. I ate wisely on the day before I set off, falling back on the carb-loading that my university running club captain Tony Furlong had taught me in our student cross-country days. I also ensured that I had approximate times in mind, chiefly so that I could get to my overnight stop in Ruislip in time for an evening meal. None of this involved any physical risks, and there was no chance of me failing to complete the walk, unlike the DNFs (did not finish) from 1908, including pre-race favourite Tom Longboat of Canada. But I did have a sense of intellectual risk in the back of my mind: what if there was nothing interesting to see on the walk? More importantly: what if my peers in the sports history community rejected the method and premise of my project, and saw it as an act of self-indulgence? These nagging doubts were not enough to derail the project. The start day arrived, the weather was good and I set off.

Central to this whole undertaking was the physical act of walking, the movement of one foot in front of the other over a predetermined route. This was where my experiment in embodied research resided. The repetitive acts of step, rhythm and cadence were natural to me, thanks to my vast experience of distance walking and running. I knew that I was moving at far less than half the speed of the race's winner: Hayes completed the Marathon in 2:55.18, whereas my total walking time was about 9 hours, but I did not let this concern me. The walk was as unlike a race as possible for me, as I deliberately chose not to take a stopwatch. Instead of racing, I set a pace that would work for me and simply stuck to it. I maintained a steady rhythm for some sections and allowed for some pauses and rests. This gave me time to think and look around, as the calm cadence of my steps required no additional thought or effort. I was not chasing mile markers, or thinking about splits between them as I did whenever I raced. This immediately created a juxtaposition with my conventional archival research, where my feet are there only to get me in and out of the building, and from my desk to the shelves. On the walk, the physicality of walking was far more central. The steps were taking me purposively from A to B, from Windsor to White City. I would have to listen to my body's needs for food, water and rest far more carefully than I do in the archive. While I needed the pace to be steady so I could think and observe, I had to put any physical demands

first.

I toyed with having a personal music device with me to edge out any boredom, but I quickly rejected this. If I was trying to achieve a measure of empathy with the historical runners, a private soundtrack would have added a sensory and conceptual barrier. Instead, I let the rural and suburban soundscapes work as the background. Obviously, these were a world away from what the 1908 runners would have heard, as cars have come to dominate all of the race's roads, while jets on their way in and out of Heathrow Airport, seven miles from the route's start, added a steady, extra drone. At times though, notably at Colne Brook near Uxbridge, nature asserted itself above the noise of engines, and gave me a flavour of what it might have been like for the runners. The stream tinkled through trees at the side of the road, birds sang, though the heron looking for fish remained characteristically silent. In Harlesden, the High Street rang to reggae and bhangra played from car stereos and takeaway cafés. On Wormwood Scrubs, the only sounds were of play, from scratch football matches to some kiteboarders, a neat echo of the historical sport that had brought me there. This soundtrack took me deep into the continuities and changes in the route that I was looking for, something that an iPod would have rendered impossible.

With a steady rhythm and no self-induced noise distraction, I left myself free to observe. Two basic yet essential words of advice from one of my university lecturers, Peter Borsay, came to mind: "Look up". He took a group of us undergraduates on a local history field trip to Ludlow, and wanted to make sure we took in as many aspects of the townscape as we could. Local history had not fired my imagination at that time, though Borsay's enthusiasm was infectious, and the words have stuck with me. Some of my looking up was planned, based around specific sites that were mentioned in the 1908 race report. Windsor Castle was a given for this, but I was more interested in the pubs and cafés that had offered their services as refreshment stations for the Olympic runners. As with the suburban soundtrack, here was another way into the continuity and change that I wanted to see, and to any resonances and coincidences. The Crooked Billet at Iver Heath was recognisable but under refurbishment. The Poplars at Ruislip was, in 1908, a café offering refreshment to young Olympians; by the time I walked the route, it had become a residential care home for the elderly.

I also paused at some key sporting sites that had been built along the course since 1908, using these as a way into considering patterns of change in suburban leisure over the century. Wembley Stadium was the major one. Lying just to the north of the route, the new Populous-designed stadium was almost complete as I passed it, a juxtaposition to the lost stadium at White City at the end of the route, where only a modern plaque on a wall and some text written on the ground gave any hint of an Olympic history. Hillingdon Lido was a shell, a shadow of its Art Deco glory days; fortunately, it has subsequently been restored. Other sporting sites on the route were older than this. With histories longer than the modern Olympic Games themselves, the playing fields of private schools Eton and Harrow stood protected, secure from development or suburban sprawl.

Alongside these set-piece observations, my approach encouraged serendipity. Looking up while my feet followed their repetitive rhythm allowed other random sites to jump out, most notably the boundary stone on Hammersmith Hospital, dated 27 July 1908, three days after the race. I had run past this stone countless times in my schooldays but had never noticed it before. The best prize for looking up, though, came in Eton High Street, where the marathon's sole surviving in-situ mile marker remains bolted to the wall of a house. With its fingerpost design pointing north and the distance given in imperial and metric measures, this sign offered me a direct way into the minds and feet of those runners, as I, like them, was able to measure out what was to come: 25 miles, or 40.2 kilometres.^[14] It was fitting, then, that the last public road on my walk, the approach route to the site of the demolished White City Stadium, had been named Dorando Close for the plucky Pietri. The street name on its

lamp post was at a similar height to the mile marker I had seen 25 miles back at Eton, a perfect symmetry between the race itself and its commemoration.

This was not an aimless wander: my route was tightly planned and mapped to help me emulate the runners as far as I could. While I find much to admire in the approach of the flâneur, as typified in Sinclair’s “drifting purposefully”, and indeed take that approach when exploring new cities, it would not have worked for what was ultimately a research activity. Instead, the route allowed me space to think (as noted above), to capture a few photographs and to practise something like immersion. I would probably call it mindfulness now, although I was not aware of the concept at the time. It was certainly a massive change from my normal research routines, governed as they were by written archives, and thus catalogued, secure and under controlled access. Here, the physicality of the structured walk allowed me to feel myself in the places that my subjects had passed through, and to get a sense—albeit limited—of their tiredness and of the sensory relationship with what happens between a starting point and a finish line. My experience as a runner helped me to reflect on the course and how it would have felt to them: the flat stretches, the slight elevations, the freedom of the rural sections, the crowd noise and excitement as the route became suburban, the changing surfaces of gravel, tarmac and tram lines, and how the looming shape of the Stadium must have appeared as they left Wormwood Scrubs. Aside from these observations, the walk gave me plenty of time to think more freely. It is impossible at this remove in time to reconstruct much of this, and the notes I made were focused on the route itself. I know that my thoughts would have wandered across plenty of mundane matters, ranging from what I would have for lunch through to my plans for the following week’s classes. However, there will have been more targeted thinking related to the task in hand, including my own memories of the places through which I was walking, with reflections on change—in the landscape and in me, particularly as I got close to my old school. There was plenty of such introspection, which served to reinforce the personal reasons behind the walk. I know that I ran through different models of how I would write this whole project up, and how I could try to reach different audiences, and I dwelt a little on whether I should roll this approach out to other routes through sporting history. Most important, though, was the time I spent reflecting on the runners of 1908, their stories and their experiences, with the route serving to get me close to them in a way that the traditional sources could not facilitate.

There was also something solitary about the walk, a characteristic that I have always valued in running but never considered in my research. In an archive or library, we are rarely alone, but we all stick to the code of silence when we are in the reading rooms and so project solitude until we break for lunch or coffee. But we are all engaged in research, we are all there for broadly the same purpose. Walking along the marathon route, I was alone for some sections where cars dominated and walking felt subversive, most notably on the dual carriageway sections of the Uxbridge Road north-east of Slough. For most of the route, though, I was not alone. However, unlike the collegiality and sense of a shared purpose I can feel with other library and archive users, I did not have any sense of unity with my fellow pedestrians. There was no sense of “we” as I drifted through with my eyes set in one part 98 years in the past, and in another on a keen hunt for relics and resonances. In crowded areas, like the town centres of Slough and Wembley, this felt as close to being alone in a crowd as I have ever been.

When I came to share the walk, though, this sense evaporated, and my nerves about the risk of failure went with it. I gave my first paper based on the walk, called “In Pietri’s Footsteps”, at a British Society of Sports History conference in Stirling. I was among friends and peers here, and the reception was excellent. The risk of embodied research paid off as people commented on what one delegate called “the epic nature” of what I had reported, and on my nerve for taking the steps rather than staying safe in the archives. Two invitations to write articles followed, leading to “From Windsor Castle to White City” in 2009 and “The Archive of the Feet” in 2010,

and the walk informed my section on the marathon in *The British Olympics*.^[15] Come 2012, as London was gearing up for its next Olympics, there was also media work where I could draw on the experience of walking the route to bring the local history of the 1908 Olympics to life. It was also great to be able to advise a few people who went on to run the route about some of the changes they could expect since the race itself. Guiding athletics historian and journalist John Bryant on the specifics of the bridge over the Central Line off Du Cane Road was a particular highlight, as his history of the London marathon had helped me to put the Olympic race in perspective as the capital's first race over this distance.

Moving on from the walk and the writing I based on it, it soon became clear that it had effected some change, however subtle, on my approach to historical research. In writing about my walk in 2010, I summed up what light it had shed on my marathon research: "Being there gives us at the very least a sense of place, an appreciation—however much the landscapes and townscapes may have changed since the sport happened—of dimension, of distances between things, of sightlines and vistas, of the topography and climate, and how all of these aspects of place may have influenced the playing and watching of sport."^[16] All of that still stands. Indeed, my marathon project has inspired me to walk in the sites of the history I was researching whenever possible, and my work on the rest of *The British Olympics* included field work as well as archival work in other parts of London, as well as in Morpeth, Much Wenlock, Liverpool and Chipping Campden. I took this approach to its next logical level by competing in road races for my work on the Cotswold Olimpicks and the Wenlock Olympian Games. Fortunately, these were at distances that were more realistic for me than a marathon would have been. Regardless of distance, competing immersed me in the historical sporting cultures and places that I was researching. Without my 1908 experience, I would not have taken those faster, more competitive steps.

The focus of my research has also shifted, thanks in no small part to the marathon experience. As well as the pieces that I wrote, the approach led me to develop my work on local histories of global events through a case study of Hampshire as a local history of the Olympic Games, and it has provided the foundation for my current work on the Cotswold Olimpicks.^[17] Walking through an ordinary place where an extraordinary sporting event took place has taken me deeply into community histories of sport and into increasingly using a macro lens. The walk, and the intellectual risks it entailed, has also encouraged me to take on other eclectic and quirky subjects in my research. The high point of this has been my work on knitting, a subject I would never have considered had I not pushed myself out of my comfort zone on the road from Windsor Castle. This project built on my desire to work in the face of my departmental scientific paradigms, and to also bring themes to Olympic history that were otherwise overlooked. Though it shares no real overlap in terms of method, my piece on "Knitting at the Olympics" and the conference papers I gave on sport and knitting are intellectual descendants of my marathon work.^[18]

My teaching has also grown from the walk: whenever I can I now include field visits, so that students get a sense of the spaces in which the historical sport they are studying took place. When it is practical to do so, I build in some physical exercise, too—like swimming in Zaha Hadid's Aquatics Centre in London, built for the 2012 Olympic Games. The students who take me up on this invitation all try to get in Lane 3 so they can follow in the ghost slipstream of record-breaking Michael Phelps. Embodiment and emulation are two lessons from my marathon walk. Similarly, when I visited Berlin, I filmed a short point of view video as I walked into the 1936 Olympic Stadium as a way of capturing the size and feel of the place, which I then used in classes on Olympic history, placed against the official 1936 footage from Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*. These are small acts, certainly, but they have had an impact on the way my students think about specific spaces and places rather than just homogeneous cities in their work on Olympic history.

When I walk now, especially in cities, I find myself increasingly drawn to the small details, the kind of everyday relics that were so crucial to my marathon walk. This process has been helped by the social media cult of ghost signs, painted advertisements for shops and business that are no longer there. It has also been helped by reading more Iain Sinclair, particularly his practice while walking of “half-noticing revisions in the fabric of things”.^[19] Walking during the lockdowns of the Covid pandemic of 2020 was also central here: as my wife Catherine and I constantly re-trod the same streets and fields in small, constrained areas, everyday items of street furniture such as post-boxes, lamp-posts, and door knockers spoke to us of the hidden histories of ordinary life.

More recently, I have had the chance to rethink my relationship with walking. Early in 2023, I suffered from sepsis when a gall bladder infection became complicated. After a stay in hospital, with exceptional treatment from the British National Health Service, I faced a long and slow route to recovery. This was both physical, as I worked to regain my strength and stamina, and mental, as I sought to get a sense of perspective on my thankfully short journey into dangerous territory. Walking, with Catherine’s constant support and companionship, was the answer. We slowly built up from one-mile walks that left me breathless and fatigued, and gradually set ourselves targets. The first was to complete, in sections, the Itchen Way, a 31-mile footpath that runs through our home city. We finished it three months after I left hospital. Then, after the surgery in June that closed off the whole episode, I joined a charity project to walk 10,000 steps a day for a month to raise funds for the UK Sepsis Trust. We completed the project, with a mix of everyday walking and some long urban and rural walks in England, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium. These walks gave me a purpose, a way of measuring my recovery, and the space to talk in time with my repetitive motion. Looking back at my marathon walk through this lens, I can appreciate the ways in which the physicality of the activity became the foundation on which I thought, observed and made connections over time.

This essay is dedicated to the memory of John Bale, whose pioneering work on sports geography paved the way for everyone interested in linking play and place.

Footnotes

1. Martin, David and Gynn, Roger. *The Olympic Marathon: the history and drama of sport’s most challenging event*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics. 2000.
2. Quoted in Bryant, John. *The London Marathon: the history of the greatest race on earth*. London: Arrow. 2005. p. 13.
3. British Olympic Council. Olympic Games of London, 1908. IV International Olympiad. Programme and General regulations. No date. p. 8. University of East London Archives. British Olympic Association collection, GB 2381 BOA/1908/PROG/12.
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