

RICHARD BROWN – ULTRA WALKER, ULTRA RUNNER

I have previously written about British ultra distance legend and centurion Sandra Brown (see <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wo-sandra-brown.pdf>) and I have wanted for some years now to balance the books and write something comparable about her husband Richard, an ultra distance legend in his own right.

First to the bare bones. Richard (born Beckenham, Kent, 18th November 1946) and Sandra (born 1st April 1949) met at London University, where they were both studying Economic History, and married soon afterwards.

While Richard had been the sportsman of the two in their younger years (he was a very successful oarsman at Oxford University), their favoured recreation post-university was recreational walking. During their twenties, their holiday strolls became progressively more demanding and energetic and were a welcome relief from their busy careers as Civil Servants.

What many people don't know is that Richard became a world class athlete despite a challenging physical condition. At university, he was diagnosed with Ankylosing Spondylitis.¹ At times, he would experience such acute pain in the back and hips that he was unable to move. Fortunately, newer generations of anti-inflammatory drugs now help control the condition. A century ago, he would probably have been completely crippled. Now doctors have come to realise that activity is the key to remaining flexible and mobile.

Against this background, Richard's athletic achievements are all the more remarkable.

Richard and Sandra started to experiment with longer distance challenges in 1982. Firstly, they entered and ran the Winchester Marathon on an icy March morning (though Richard thought Sandra had entered them for the half-marathon!). Around this time, they also joined the Long Distance Walking Association (LDWA)² and began to take part in their events, quickly building up to the Pilgrims Hundred in May 1982, the first of many LDWA 'hundreds' that they have enjoyed in subsequent years.



Sandra and Richard leave a checkpoint in the 2006 Northumbria LDWA Hundred – one of many over a long LDWA career

Fast forward three months and, in August 1982, Sandra finished her first Centurion hundred (C735) in Leicester with an impressive 22:18:24. Richard vowed never to do such a mad thing, but was spurred to emulate her feat when their race walking club refused to allow Sandra to enter their event the following year “because women could not and should not do

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ankylosing_spondylitis.

² See <https://www.ldwa.org.uk/>

those things” – even though she had!. “I never thought I could walk a hundred miles, but Sandra did and completed the course in good time. So I had to give it a go.”

With the 1983 Snowdonia 100 Miler under his belt and with a smattering of shorter distance walks with the Surrey Walking Club, he followed Sandra’s lead and won his own Centurion badge (C760) in Ewhurst with a time of **21:03:49**.

The next year, 1984, saw Richard and Sandra walking with greater confidence and speed. At the annual Centurions qualifier in Leicester, Richard finished in a much improved **18:50:23**. Not to be outdone, Sandra walked even faster, storming home to finish with a new British women’s record of 18:36:29. In fact, Richard was definitely playing second fiddle to Sandra at this stage as she went on to win silver medals in the European Veterans’ Games in the W35 5000m track walk and 10km roadwalk and then to set a new World Best for the 24 Hour Run in Lancashire, recording an outstanding 131 miles 583 yards.

Coming in so late to such a demanding sport and lacking flexibility and rhythm due to his spondylitis, improvement for Richard only came with hard work and determination, with a mileage approaching one hundred miles a week.

Richard finally managed to turn the tables on Sandra in a 24 Hour track running race at Coatsbridge, Scotland, in November 1984, finishing 6th with 124 miles 169 yards, one place ahead of Sandra who recorded a distance of 120 miles 335 yards.

Over the next few years, his new found career blossomed, as he chipped away at his 100 mile walk time. In May 1985, he recorded **18:33:52** in Sint-Oedenrode in Holland (becoming Continental Centurion 144), then recorded **18:17:17** a year later at Leicester and finally recorded a superb **17:00:35** in July 1988 at Leicester.

His ultra distance running career was also blossoming, with equally impressive performances on the road and on the track. In 1988 alone, he recorded 8:05 at the Solihull 100km, completed 720 miles in the Sri Chinmoy 1,000 Mile race in New York (setting a UK 6 day road record of 518 miles and a W40 1,000km World best of 7 days 11 hours 40 mins 15 secs along the way), won and set a new record of 144 miles in the Preston 24 Hour Run, and finished second with 452 miles in the Gateshead International Invitation 6 Day Run.

At this stage, Richard’s mind turned to other challenges. In 1982, the Irish ultra walk champion John ‘Paddy’ Dowling³ had walked the length of Ireland, starting from Malin Head (Ireland’s most northerly point in County Donegal) and finishing at Mizen Head in County Cork. His time of 5 days 22 hours 30 minutes had been officially recognized as a record by the Guinness Book of Records. He had also completed the feat in the reverse direction (Mizen to Malin). In October 1986, Dowling had walked from Lands End to John o’Groats in just under 12 days 10 hours, only 9 hours outside the running record.

In April 1988, Richard ticked off the first challenge, completing the 375 miles Irish End-to-End run (Mizen to Malin) in a new record of 4 days 12 Hours. What made that performance special was the presence of Dowling, who had taken Richard and Sandra under his wing in their early overseas walks.

Paddy started out from Mizen Head with me. But I only had 2 supporters in one car and he had no-one! So we quickly got further and further apart until my car duo were worn out chasing around the lanes of rural Ireland trying to find us both. Paddy did the decent thing and stopped so I could go on and take the overall record – 4 days 12 hours. What a lovely man.

In September 1988, Richard attempted the much longer and tougher Lands End to John o’Groats. This would require a separate article on its own. Suffice it to say, he finished the 875 mile slog in 10 days 18 hours 23 minutes, to officially break the record by over a day. Conditions had deteriorated during the 10 days and his final few days were completed in driving rain and a northwesterly wind.

Just as Richard was now dominating the men’s ultra run and walk scenes, Sandra was doing likewise on the women’s front. For their efforts, they earned their first English vests in 1989. Richard would be 43 and Sandra 40 when they finally toed the line in their first international (the Rouen 24 Hour Walk in May of that year). It had been a long time coming and it was not a once off recognition, both subsequently donning Great Britain vests in 1991, 1992 and 1993.

³ See <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wo-john-dowling.pdf>

Rouen was a family success, with Richard winning overall with **205.320km** and Sandra finishing as the first woman with 185.620km.



Richard and Sandra have made a habit of finishing first man and woman in many events over the years. Here they pose for the cameras after this feat at the 1990 English Centurions race at Leicester

Soon after this dual victory, Sandra joined the walkers for the 1989 Paris Colmar Classic⁴ – 524km for men and 376km for women. She was not successful on this occasion, stopping after 247.5km, but it left her and Richard both keen to set the record straight the following year. And that they did, Richard finishing 9th with 73 hours 29 minutes (522.5km) and Sandra finishing 2nd with 51 hours 48 minutes (340km). Their performances were captured in a 52 minute BBC Documentary *Mad Dogs and Englishmen*⁵ which still makes for compulsive viewing. With their dual efforts, they became the first husband-and-wife to finish the great classic.

1990 also introduced Richard to the great Polish walker Zbigniew Klapa.⁶ Klapa had won the Chateau Thierry 200km walk in 21:26:36, Richard finishing second with **22:44:59**. Klapa again had Richard's measure in the Bar le Duc 200km and won the first of his five Paris Colmar Classics in 1990. They would have more battles over the next few years. Klapa remains to this day one of the few ultra walkers who always won!

Richard and Sandra would participate in two further Paris Colmar Classics, in 1991 and 1992.

The next few years saw Richard setting more records. In 1991, he won the Surgeres 48 Hour Run with a British record of **401.208km** (being only the 6th man in modern times to go over 400kms). In 1992, he won the Bazancourt 200km Walk in a British record of **21:42:41**. In 1993, he improved his 100 Mile Walk time to **16:50:28**, with a win in the Continental Centurions qualifier in St. Oedenrode. This bettered the 33 year old British record of 16:54.14, set by the great Bill O'Reilly. A couple of months later, he won the classic Manchester-Blackpool 50 Mile walk with a record time of **7:49:40**.

Richard's Lands End to John o'Groat record had lasted less than a year, being beaten by 3 hours by the great Don Ritchie. Richard was keen to take it back, and finally in 1995, he and Sandra organized a dual attempt, in which they were both successful. Richard finished first in a time of 10 days 2 hours 25 minutes, taking 13 hours off Ritchie's record. Sandra had a dreadful time, blistering badly on the first day and being forced to walk for the remainder of the attempt. Yet her final time of 13 days 10 hours 1 minute had taken nearly 8 hours off the women's record. Their record performances are discussed in Richard's book *The Winning Experience*.⁷

⁴ See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris-Colmar>

⁵ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2srX_Mj69g. This 47 minute video follows the fortunes of Richard and Sandra as they compete in the toughest ultra distance walk in the world

⁶ See https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zbigniew_Klapa



Richard and Sandra in the 2006 24 Heures de Bourges in France – they have been competing with distinction on the European ultra walk and ultra run scene since the late 1980s

This would be a long article indeed if I were to document Richard’s run and walk feats year by year. Suffice it to say that he has completed 130 events of 100 miles or above, including 18 British Centurion hundreds – not as many as Sandra but still an awesome statistic.

He has set a significant number of World and British bests, both in walk and run mode.

He has 4 Centurion badges - UK C760 (1983), Continental C144 (1985), US C49 (2000) and Malaysian C8 (2001).

He has 25 finishes in official Centurion walks, with a best of 16:50:28, and has won the British Centurions race a record 10 times. Apart from his British best time, he has 4 further times under 18 hours and 6 further times under 19 hours.

21:03:49	24/06/1983	Ewhurst	GBR	UK760
18:50:23	27/07/1984	Leicester	GBR	
18:33:52	18/05/1985	Sint-Oedenrode	NED	CN144
19:00:09	10/05/1986	Sint-Oedenrode	NED	
18:17:17	25/07/1986	Leicester-Congerstone	GBR	
17:00:35	29/07/1988	Leicester-Congerstone	GBR	
17:54:28	28/07/1990	Hungarton (Leicester)	GBR	
17:52:47	28/06/1991	Ewhurst	GBR	
18:50:29	21/07/1992	Leicester	GBR	
16:50:28	22/05/1993	Sint-Oedenrode	NED	
17:58:17	21/07/1993	London-Battersea	GBR	
18:39:42	29/07/1994	Hungarton (Leicester)	GBR	
19:23:16	05/08/1995	London	GBR	
18:12:04	03/08/1996	Colchester	GBR	
19:22:26	20/06/1998	Douglas	IOM	
19:08:16	14/08/1999	London	GBR	
20:29:45	24/09/2000	Golden,CO	USA	US49
19:50:39	04/08/2001	Colchester	GBR	
177.772	25/08/2001	Genting Highlands	MA	MC8

⁷ *The Winning Experience* by Richard Brown, 1996, Redwood Books, Trowbridge, Wilts

20:31:59	07/05/2005	Weert	NED
20:33:00	30/07/2005	Kings Lynn	GBR
20:12:44	11/07/2009	Newmarket	GBR
21:23:10	22/-9/2012	Colchester	GBR
21:45:23	15/08/2015	Castletown	IOM
22:48:55	06/08/2017	Bury St Edmunds	GBR

He sits in second place in the World All Time Top-10 for the 100 miles walk with 16:50:28 and has a further Top-10 entry with 17:00:35.

1	Jan de Jonge	SV de LAT	NED	17-12-1946	16:37:02	14-05-1983	Sint-Oedenrode	NED	36
2	Richard Brown	Surrey WC	GBR	18-11-1946	16:50:28	22-05-1993	Sint-Oedenrode	NED	46
3	Frank O'Reilly	Lozells Harriers	GBR	01-01-1925	16:54:16	02-07-1960	Leicester-Skegness	GBR	35
	Jan de Jonge	SV de LAT	NED	17-12-1946	16:55:32	31-05-1980	Sint-Oedenrode	NED	33
4	John Moullin	Belgrave Harriers	GBR	08-09-1941	16:55:44	25-06-1971	Ewhurst	GBR	29
	Frank O'Reilly	Lozells Harriers	GBR	01-01-1925	16:58:16	06-07-1962	Leicester-Skegness	GBR	37
	Richard Brown	Surrey WC	GBR	18-11-1946	17:00:35	29-07-1988	Leicester-Congerstone	GBR	41
5	John Cannell	Boundary Harriers	GBR	29-12-1945	17:10:15	29-07-1988	Leicester-Congerstone	GBR	42
6	Derek Harrison	Boundary Harriers	GBR	02-03-1949	17:15:50	30-07-1976	Leicester-Skegness	GBR	27
7	Jan Vos	RWV	NED	13-11-1938	17:17:59	31-05-1980	Sint-Oedenrode	NED	41
8	Hew Neilson	Woodford Green	GBR	15-04-1916	17:18:51	20-10-1960	Walton	GBR	44
9	Mike Holmes	York Postal	GBR		17:21:52	20-08-1982	Leicester	GBR	
10	Dave Boxall	Brighton & Hove	GBR	28-10-1933	17:24:00	22-05-1979	Ewhurst	GBR	45

One statistic of note is the 24 Hour Walk / Run double. In Richard's case, with a 24 Hour Run distance of 233km and with a 24 Hour Walk distance, of 221km, he has a double of 454km, a mark which probably puts him in the number two all-time spot behind the great Yiannis Kouros (303km run and 168km walk, totalling 471km). He is indeed a champion in both formats.

He has raced less in recent years but has still managed some impressive performances in the older age groups. In 2010, he set a new M60 World 6 Day Run record of **705km** in Athens. In 2012, he set an M65 World 6 Day Run record of **654.3km** in Balatonfured. His finishing time of **21:45:23** in the 2015 English Centurion qualifier on the Isle of Man would have certainly been an M65 record but he has not bothered to claim it.



Richard proudly displays his British colours after setting a new M60 24 Hours Run World Record in Athens

Richard has been involved administratively for many years now on both the run and walks front. To quote him from a recent conversation:

I have really enjoyed putting any experience I have back into the sport as the Manager of Team GB's 24 hour running squads for the past 10 years. The team has been built up so that the men secured the World Gold medal last year (2015) in Turin (the first time ever) with the women winning European bronze. This year the men won silver in the European Championships in Albi (France) with the person I have helped (Dan Lawson) winning the individual gold medal. I have now passed on the baton!



Richard (second row, far right) with Team GB after their win at the 2015 World 24 Hour Championships in Turin

Richard helped Dan come 2nd in the grueling 250km Spartathlon run from Athens to Sparta, after helping a female athlete get a podium spot in a previous year and himself finishing this event as a 60th birthday present to himself!

I must alert readers to an interview with Richard, recorded by Rachel Cutler for the British Library Sound Archive. It is spread over 7 parts and is a wonderful listen – <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Sport/021M-C0790X0049XX-0100V0>.

When I ran this article past Richard, he stressed that while an individual may get their name in the record books, there is always a great team of usually unsung heroes who make this possible - whether driving at 5mph for hundreds of miles on the Paris-Colmar road, manning check points on windswept hillsides on LDWA events, or encouraging from the road side or track side.

Richard's place in the ultra distance annals is secure. The quality of his performances in a career of over 30 years speak much louder than can I. Well done Richard! May you continue to enjoy those long strolls with Sandra for many years yet.

Tim Erickson
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