

## Ultra-distance racewalking by Richard McChesney C1131

First published in Ultrarunning World Magazine 2022

Did you know that long before people started running ultramarathon races there were ultra-distance walking races in the UK and USA, with races ranging from 100 miles though to six days?



Early records are a little sketchy but the first person recorded to have walked 100 miles in the UK (in under 24 hours) is James Edwin E. Fowler-Dixon who took just 20 hours and 36 minutes to walk 100 miles on a track at Lillie Bridge, London in 1877. Since then, 1,211 people have walked 100 miles in under 24 hours to become a UK Centurion and worldwide 1,549 walkers have qualified as a Centurion in one of the seven countries that recognise Centurion race-walking - A Centurion being “someone who, as an amateur, has walked 100 miles within 24 hours in a competition.”

### My story

I started walking in 2012 when an ankle injury prevented me from running a marathon I had entered. I switched to the walker’s division, finished the race in 5 hours and 13 minutes, and within 13 months I found myself walking in my first 24 hour race. Prior to taking up walking I had been a runner since my school years competing at a high level (winning races from 5km to the marathon) but for most of my thirty years as a runner I was either injured or between injuries.

I had ‘run’ three 100km races but in each race I had walked a significant portion of the event and in one of those races a walker had finished less than an hour behind me. That got me thinking. As a ‘runner’ I didn’t train to walk fast and when I took walking breaks during my 100km races I walked slow and without any real purpose.

My 2012 ankle injury never fully recovered and I spent more time training to walk fast than I did training to run. In early 2013 I walked a marathon one weekend and then ran the London marathon the following weekend. Whilst my overall time at London was faster than when I walked the previous weekend, the last 7.2km was slower. That was the last time I ran further than 10km.

Many of you may know me or recognise my name. After completing my first two 100 mile races in organised walking races I started walking in UK ultramarathon races – completing the 2015 Thames Path 100 in 25 hours and 2 minutes (should have been faster but I struggled over the last 15 miles – don’t we all?) and in 2016 I finished 27<sup>th</sup> in the Grand Union Canal race in 36 hours and 42 minutes. Since then I’ve competed in many ‘running’ ultras as a walker, and even won one of them – the 2018 Suffolk Backyard Ultra (as it is now called).

I have a 100 mile walking PB of 20 hours 44 minutes and have walked 381 miles (614km) in a six day race.

### **Why walk?**

If you are reading this article you are most probably an ultra-distance runner, so why would you want to consider walking?

**Injured:** As I've mentioned, I switched to walking because my body couldn't tolerate the impact of running, and walking has enabled me to remain in an endurance sport that I have always loved. Before I 'discovered' walking I assumed that if I was injured then I couldn't exercise. It was a case of either run or sit on the couch and watch TV. There was nothing in between. An opinion that I'm sure many people reading this will resonate with. But fast walking uses different muscles than running and has much lower impact. This means that many injured runners can continue walking even when injury prevents running.

**Race faster:** I'm not saying that you need to walk with the same technique of the elite racewalkers that you see on TV, but if you were to incorporate fast powerwalking into your ultramarathon training you would find that when you take your walking breaks during future ultras you will naturally walk faster, and the end result will be faster overall race times. Most runners will take walking breaks during ultramarathons with the aim of resting their running muscles, but there is no reason why you need to walk slow during those rest breaks.

**A new challenge:** Perhaps you are looking for a new challenge for 2022. Why not see whether you could walk 100 miles in under 24 hours. The next UK Centurions qualifying race will be held in Middlesbrough on the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> August. Full details can be found [here](#).

### **How to walk fast**

I'm sure that you will have noticed as a runner that your arms and legs work together to move you forward. When your left leg moves forward your right arm moves forward, and vice versa. The same goes for walking. Most runners have their arms bent at the elbow and perhaps without realising it they drive with their arms when running. Every time their arm goes forward, so does their leg.

Well, walking fast is just as simple. Walk with your arms bent at the elbow as if you were running, and drive with the arms. Your legs might be tired from running, which is why you are taking a walking break, but your arms aren't tired. Driving with your arms will ensure that your legs follow suit, and the end result is fast walking.

Obviously, there is much more to it than that, but simply focusing on driving with your arms during your walking breaks will result in a faster, longer walking stride, using different muscles to your running, which will rest your running muscles whilst still maintaining a good overall pace.

And if you are interested in pure ultra-distance racewalking, the other main thing to keep in mind is that one foot must be on the ground at all times when walking.

### **Some well-known runners who are also Centurion walkers**

Don't take my word for it. As well as being the world's best ultra-distance runner of his time, in 1998 Yiannis Kouros walked 100 miles in under 24 hours to qualify as an [Australian Centurion \(number 33\)](#). His time was 22 hours 55 minutes.

Champion Australian ultrarunner Barry Loveday is Australian Centurion number 62.

Former JOGLE record holders, Sandra Brown, Richard Brown and Sharon Gaytor are all UK Centurion walkers – numbers 735, 760 and 1006 respectively. All three of these athletes also have many other UK and/or world running records helped, I'm sure, by their ability to rest their tired running muscles by switching to fast walking when necessary.

Another runner who is also a UK Centurion walker is James Bassett – winner of the 2021 Lon Las Ultra (250 miles across Wales). James qualified as a UK Centurion racewalker number 1175 when he completed 100 miles in 21 hours 24 minutes in 2017, and used his walking experience to power himself through the Lon Las Ultra during his walking breaks.

### **More information**

If, having read this article you would like to learn more about incorporating walking into your training you are welcome to [contact me directly](#).

Richard McChesney

### **Short bio:**

Richard has completed 36 walks of 100 miles or farther since 2013. As well as being a regular in many UK ultra's, he often creates his own 'adventures' which have included a 44 hour circumnavigation of London's M25 motorway (the A & B roads on the outside of the motorway), and visiting all of London's 270 tube stations during a five day walk in 2020.

He has qualified as a Centurion racewalker in New Zealand (#19), the UK (#1131) and the Netherlands (#432) and he writes about his walking races and adventures at [www.RichardWalksLondon.com](http://www.RichardWalksLondon.com)