

## The story of the Karran Cup

The oldest event in the athletics calendar takes place shortly. This is the Peel to Douglas road race and has been going on since 1909. Here is the story of how it began and what it was like to run the famous course in those days.

Athletics meetings had been affected by the demise of the Belle Vue, The Falconcliff and the Olympia which had attracted top sportsmen in cycling as well as running.

These three stadiums all closed in the 1890s and left the island with little in the way of facilities to carry on the tradition of athletics that had produced a British four miles champion in 1872. Across in England in 1908 athletics was creating a lot of interest for a number of reasons. The Olympic Games had been held in London and the climax had been the marathon in which the American Joseph Hayes scored an unpopular victory when the leader Dorando Pietri a pastry cook from Capri collapsed within sight of the finishing tape, was helped over the line and disqualified. It is highly likely that both competitors were on performance enhancing drugs, but there were no drug tests in those days.

The British sense of fair play to say nothing of getting back at the Yanks was boosted however by victory in a 'marathon' race in Madison Square Garden when Alf Shrubbs who was a professional and therefore banned from the Olympics, beat the American Tom Longboat. Like most races in those days a lot of money was riding on the athletes.

*The Isle of Man Weekly Times* came up with the idea of promoting a marathon of their own running from West to East along Peel to Douglas road from the Peel Football Ground to the Palace with a lap round reputedly the largest ballroom in Europe. The route was almost exactly the same as today's course in distance and there are many other similarities that would surprise those who like the author thought athletics in those days was rather haphazard. First the competitors were required to produce a medical certificate and proof that they had run at least four races previously. They were allowed a trainer who could follow on a bicycle and offer refreshments when required. More of that later.

The roads were not tarmaced and the small amount of cars meant that most people walked in the road. There was a real hazard of tripping or falling off a bicycle as a result of the road surface.

The event caused an amazing amount of interest with trains taking supporters to the start and back to Douglas to see them come down Railway Hill. Although the Times does not specifically state it, there was a lot of betting on the runners.

### The Race

The event was hailed by the Times as being 'the greatest event in the annals of Manx sport' and attracted thirty two competitors who passed the entry regulations. They set off from Peel Football Ground amid 'hundreds of supporters' on April Fools' Day 1909. These then caught the train for Douglas stopping at all the stations on the way, with a man from the telephone company providing an up to date bulletin for the Palace officials as to the race positions.

There was only one man in it after the first quarter mile Joseph Stanley Karran of Belmont Cottages in Douglas who with a 'clock work style' went out ahead. Karran's splits were as follows:

St John's 12 mins

Greeba Bridge 22. 30sec

No 6 milestone from Douglas 25.45sec

Corlett's Halfway House(Waggon and Horses) 31 mins  
Crosby Post Office 33.45sec  
Union Mills Post Office 45.45sec  
Braddan Bridge 51.40sec  
Quarter Bridge 54.29sec  
Royal Hotel (probably The Railway) 62.25sec  
Finish (Palace Ballroom) 70.52 sec

At Lazy Hill next to the Brown Bobby his mother came out to see him and he responded 'It's all right mother I'm going through.' Going down Bank Hill (Railway Hill) a dog came at him but was quickly driven off. He came into the ballroom looking fresh to win by 3 minutes 48 seconds from the second man Daniel Lawson of Hope Street, Douglas with 17 year old George Shimmin in third place 51 seconds adrift of Lawson. Out of the 32 starters only half finished with the final finisher Joseph Cogley of the Fort Ann Hotel having to thread his way through the side show of a race between runners and roller skaters over a quarter of a mile.

One interesting point is the age of the competitors. Karran was 21 and the average age of the competitors 'was about 20 years of age'. Indeed in 1913 a competitor with the unlikely name of Bertie Boulter finished well up the field aged 12 ! Down in 8<sup>th</sup> place was John Crellin of Head Road, Douglas, grandfather of our fell runner, T. T. competitor and intrepid mountain climber. He was the first president of Manx A.C. The prizes were presented by James B. Edgar, the former British 4 mile champion. Another distinguished runner named Tom Lewin was also there. Edgar's career is another fascinating excursion into the history of Manx athletics.

### **'How I won the race'**

Karran's story explaining his preparations and problems during the race is interesting as shows he was well prepared, employed a trainer and had problems as well. He ran the distance three times with fortnightly intervals, otherwise running two, four and six miles every other day. At Union Mills he felt a nail coming through his shoe 'and it kept piercing my foot at every stride.' Referring to the incident on Bank Hill, he said 'if my pace had been any slower the dog would have got my leg.' He thanked his personal trainer James Dunlop and then came an endorsement for the wonder drink Oxo which he which drank at 3.30pm prior to the race which began at 6pm. 'I have partaken of the beverage right through my training and have found it invigorating and stimulating.' stated Karran. The vote of thanks included one to Mr Blythe, representative of Oxo who supplied his energy boosting beverage at the beginning and end of the race to the competitors.

While Karran won the cup, three medals were awarded to the second, third and fourth finishers. The fourth finisher Gordon Hull's medal turned up in Canada some years ago although the lady who wrote into the papers had no idea how. I replied explaining about the race but never received an answer.

THE "TIMES" MARATHON RACE.  
PEEL TO DOUCLAS—RUN 1st APRIL 1909.



runner, JOSEPH STANLEY KARRAN, and his Trainer, JAMES DUNLOP.  
Distance— $11\frac{1}{2}$  miles. Time—1 h. 10 m. 52 secs.

One of the Times early forays into sporting photography showing Karran and his trainer James Dunlop.

## **The second Peel to Douglas –bigger and better than the first**

The second race in the series was held in late May in conjunction with the Auto-Cycle Races as the T.T. was then styled. Athletics wise things had moved on and the aim of reviving interest in the sport had been achieved. Karran was no longer invincible having been beaten in the Ramsey to Andreas miniature marathon sponsored by the Ramsey Courier, and in the Laxey Good Friday race by Thomas Evans of Ramsey.

The northsiders were down in force to support their favourite who must have fancied his chances as Karran had sprained his leg in the Ramsey race. In addition a national walking champion working at Cunningham's Camp named Robert Wilkinson had entered amid controversy that he was not a permanent resident. The officials stuck strictly to the entry rules barring one runner for not producing a medical certificate.

On a hot sultry night twenty six runners started from the football ground with hundreds of cyclists including a large contingent from Ramsey hoping for a northern victory following them. Karran, Wilkinson and Evans tracked the race leader Alfred Kennish of Douglas as they headed for Ballaleece Bridge.

At St Johns Evans stumbled on a loose stone twisting his ankle and was dispatched back to Ramsey on the train. At Ballacraine Karran and Wilkinson overtook Kennish and raced each other with Walter Teare of Castletown and Kennish not far behind. The dusty roads and inconsiderate motorists made things difficult for the runners. Wilkinson took a slight lead at the Quarter Bridge and Karran began to feel the effects of his sprained leg. However he stayed in close proximity until at the railway station a dog gripped Karran in the leg (got him this time!) and slowed him up. Despite this Karran was gaining slightly on his opponent at the Jubilee Clock but at Broadway Wilkinson accelerated away to win in 68 minutes 45 seconds. Karran finished fifty seconds adrift with Teare and Kennish eight and ten seconds behind him respectively.

A glance at the names on the Karran Cup show that there are remarkably few different names on it. Karran himself never won it again. There are serial winners like Abba Taylor in the twenties and thirties, Peter McElroy (of Chit Chat fame) in the fifties and sixties, Peter Harraghy in the late sixties and the incredible Steve Kelly in the seventies and eighties. For instance Dave Newton and Graham Clarke, two of the fastest men over the course only have their names on the trophy once and twice respectively. Karran would have been amazed to see runners breaking the hour for the distance. But then the roads are better surfaced now aren't they?

The Peel to Douglas is truly the Blue Riband of Manx road running.

Mr Karran a remarkably spry 117 year old kindly gave this interview to the author at the Graham Davies Home for Retired Athletes at Kitterland, Isle of Man.

By Skeealaght