

Bunion Derby: The 1928 Footrace Across America

One of the most outrageous sporting events of the 20th century was the C.C. Pyle International Transcontinental Foot Race of 1928, better known as the Bunion Derby.

Pyle was the P.T. Barnum of the sports world, a hustler and promoter who promised \$25,000 to the winner of his Los Angeles-to-New York footrace. The race was put together in part to promote the opening of Route 66 between Los Angeles and Chicago by Tulsa businessman Cyrus Stearns Avery. On March 4, 1928, 199 runners, from hoary professionals to rank amateurs, left the West Coast on an 84-day, 3,400-mile odyssey that would horribly try their souls and soles and raise some of them to the status of legend in an American era overrun with excess.

Charles Kastner, a Seattle-based writer who has been a frequent contributor to *Marathon & Beyond* and who wrote a major feature for us on Edward “The Sheik” Gardner (*M&B*, July/August 2001), one of the five African Americans who ran in the original Bunion Derby, has put his research on the race together in a delightful book, *Bunion Derby: The 1928 Footrace Across America* (University of New Mexico Press, 256 pages, \$24.95).

As in any such major, far-reaching contest, it is usually the nobodies who make for interesting reading, and that is certainly the case here. It wasn't the professional runners who stole the show; it was the colorful minor players. There is no doubt that Chuck's favorite contestant is the aforementioned Ed Gardner, who finished eighth with an elapsed time of 659:56:47. Eddie Gardner was a tall, long-limbed runner who made quite a name for himself in the Seattle area as a very accomplished athlete, three times winning the famous Ten Mile Washington State Championship between 1921 and 1927. Because of the racial climate in some sections of the United States during the 1920s, the Negro runners were sometimes reviled and castigated by locals as they ran through town; at the other extreme, their progress was breathlessly reported in Negro newspapers. (Chuck has contributed profiles of the African American entrants to An Online Reference Guide to African American History.)

The race was eventually won by a young Oklahoma Indian, 20-year-old Andy Payne, who averaged 10-minute miles for the entire race. He used his prize money

to pay off the mortgage on the family farm, to speculate on Oklahoma real estate, and to go to college.

Chuck Kastner's tale of the Bunion Derby is told in a straightforward, chronological manner. He manages to bring the vast array of characters alive while maintaining an easy-to-follow, day-by-day account of the increasingly wearying spectacle. An additional benefit of Chuck's book is his extensive research; between the copious footnotes and the huge bibliography, no stone is left unturned or unmarked.

We tend to be amazed at some of the running feats that we hear about these days, but most of them pale when put up against this grueling march into running history. —*Rich Benyo*