

## CHAPTER 1



*Believed to have been taken 2 years before the Bunion Derby, this photo shows C. C. Pyle taking in the sea air on the ocean liner France. (Part of the New York World-Telegram and the Sun Newspaper Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.)*

# THE BUNION DERBY

In the 19th century, American cities were full of con artists. Wielding a scalpel and lurking in saloons, barbershops, hotels, and deserted alleyways, they called themselves chiropodists. They gave a bad name to the reputable chiropodist, a precursor to today's podiatrist. If you were unlucky enough to meet one, you were probably already unlucky enough to have corns or bunions. And if you were naïve enough to hire a "chiropodist" to cut off the offending part of your foot, sometimes you were unlucky enough to die from an infected wound.

When C. C. Pyle conceived the course for his race in 1927, podiatry was primitive at best. It was by then a regulated medical field, but shoes were still manufactured in a way that offered little flexibility or support for the wearer, and feet were suffering for it. A Dr. Scholl's ad of the time addressed the severity of the situation when it urged: "Don't neglect your feet. Even a corn is no trivial thing. No matter what foot trouble you suffer from—corns, calluses, bunions, tired, aching feet, weak or broken down

arches, crooked or over-lapping toes, weak ankles, tender heels, perspiring or odorous feet—you can have quick and lasting relief.”

And now Pyle was promoting the idea of a race in which a group of people predisposed to foot problems would leave Los Angeles and run the equivalent of a couple of marathons a day, every day, until they either dropped from exhaustion or reached New York City. Even coming from a man known for being outlandish, the idea seemed too far-fetched.

For the previous 2 years, one of sportswriters’ favorite pastimes was scorning Pyle. He had jumped onto the national scene by officially signing Red Grange as his first client on November 21, 1925. The young collegiate football player became a superstar when, in the aftermath of a phenomenal game, sportswriter Grantland Rice composed football poetry describing Grange as a ghost. It was this poem that led to his nickname, the Galloping Ghost, but it was Pyle who harnessed the Galloping Ghost’s energy and made him a star. Pyle had approached Grange in 1924 and, after many months, signed the young man as his first client. It was a bold move for Pyle, who was an obscure theatre manager in Champaign, Illinois, Grange’s hometown. In hindsight, it’s easy to see why Grange fell under his spell: Pyle was awfully persuasive and had been waiting for a moment like this for much of his life.

At nearly 6 feet tall with broad shoulders, Pyle dressed impeccably, usually sporting a black suit and black derby, hiding a well-groomed patch of yellowish gray hair. The following year, the *New Yorker* would compare Pyle’s neatly trimmed mustache to that of W. C. Fields, who used to sport a fake one in his silent films, although he dropped the look by his more famous films of the 1930s and 1940s. C. C. Pyle looked like a man of money and influence, and he was, after years of trying. His initials, sports journalists joked, stood for “Cash and Carry,” and Pyle embraced the nickname. Even a few years before meeting up with Grange, Pyle was earning a respectable living, but after representing the athlete, his income accelerated dramatically.

But it wasn’t Pyle’s appearance that made him so convincing. The man could talk. “He is,” one newspaper later wrote, “a Scotch-Irishman with

twinkling gray eyes, who immediately takes you in, in the warmth of his greeting and his general good fellowship.”

From a financial standpoint, the theatrical manager–turned–sports promoter immediately proved his word was as good as gold. Eleven days into his new career, Grange was richer by \$82,000, playing several games with a ragtag operation called the Chicago Bears. On his 12th day, Grange earned another \$300,000 after agreeing to appear in the movie *One Minute to Play*, released in 1926. The following year he starred in *A Racing Romeo*.

For \$12,000, Grange also agreed to have his name associated with a sweater. His approval for the creation of a Red Grange football doll rang up another \$10,000. He then endorsed a brand of shoes for \$5,000, a ginger ale for another \$5,000, and a cap for \$2,500. Pyle even convinced a cigarette firm to pay Grange in the neighborhood of \$10,000 to endorse their brand. It didn’t matter that Grange was known as a nonsmoker. All he had to say was that if he ever were to take up smoking, he felt sure that he’d like that brand.

From there, Pyle began representing tennis amateurs, turning them professional and laying the groundwork for a professional circuit. He also started to organize a hockey league in March 1927. Finally wealthy and well known, if Pyle had an idea and a spare few minutes, he tried to implement it.

But this plan for a national foot race did little more than make a lot of people shake their heads, some in admiration, others in irritation.

Injury or death was a common argument against Pyle’s transcontinental race. One prominent medical expert, Dr. K. H. Begg, predicted that 5 to 10 years would be shaved off the runners’ lives. Clarence DeMar, famed for frequently winning the Boston Marathon, declined to participate in Pyle’s epic adventure. He believed that no human being could run the equivalent of two Boston Marathons a day, every day, for several months. If their bodies didn’t give out, their minds would, DeMar reasoned, from the monotony of running all day for months.

But the thrill of endurance contests was worth the risk, even if you risked all and lost, according to William Hickman Pickens, Pyle's close friend and crucial executive for the past few years. He had said as much in his days as a promoter, in a lengthy 1909 monologue he delivered to the *Los Angeles Times*.

"Well, the boys were a bit unlucky today," shrugged off Bill Pickens when a reporter had asked about automobile racers crashing into fences. "But what do you expect from the automobile racing game? If you cut out the danger and fence-smashing stunts, the crowds would not be attracted, and the sport would be relegated to the bean-bag class. We are living in a fast age, and the professional athlete who is willing to sacrifice his bones and gore on the altar of a highly seasoned sport is the man of the hour in his line.

"You don't believe that Barney Oldfield thinks the crowd comes to see him break records or to witness his wonderful control over a modern juggernaut that goes crazy with the heat, do you? Not on your life. Barney often puffs one of those six-inch perfectos and laughs, and he tells how they all come to the races when he drives, for no other purpose than hoping to see him in a smashup. They have heard so much of his different accidents and have read so often of his supposedly charmed life that they don't want to miss a chance of being 'in at the death.'"

What also appeared questionable to rational people was not just what so many miles would do to the body, but that this race wouldn't be on a running track. It would be *on the roads*.

The federal highway system was still in its infancy in 1928. Ultimately, Pyle selected Highway 66, later more famously known as Route 66. A modern marvel of interstate stretching from Los Angeles to Chicago, it was only 2 years old, largely unpaved, and it wouldn't be completely finished until 1937. The most consistently paved roads wouldn't appear until the runners were deep into Missouri, where it would remain automobile-friendly until Chicago. From there the runners would take a hodgepodge of state routes to New York City, many of the surfaces paved, but some not.

C. C. Pyle imagined runners, with only the poorest footwear, traveling

over a highway of pavement as well as dirt, gravel, cement-covered bricks, and in a few stretches, wooden planks. In 1878, a *New York Times* editorial made an observation that was still true in 1928: “It would be impossible to form any accurate estimate of the enormous amount of human suffering that has been caused by boots and shoes. It is true that no man in his senses wears tight shoes, but even the loosest shoe, when new, is stiff and uncomfortable. To break in a new pair of shoes is something every man dreads only less than the annual visit to the dentist.”

Shoe companies in 1928 were making a tidy business offering the public everything they could think of to cure their aching feet. Corns, a thickening of skin that collects around the toes, scored high on the foot misery index, but the worst were bunions—a knotting of the muscle and disfigurement of the foot, typically caused by tight footwear. Shoe companies were selling everything from bunion plasters—an application pasted to the bunion—to soothing foot balm. The Coward Good Sense Shoe for Bunions flourished before 1900 and after. In fact, Coward Shoes as a brand thrives in the 21st century.

From building the Erie Canal to inventing flight, Americans had toiled for 150 years to do everything possible to avoid walking, let alone running, across the country. No wonder sportswriters scoffed when Pyle plotted his national foot race. Most people in the country didn’t even personally know an avid runner. Only 168 men competed in the 1927 Boston Marathon. In comparison, 40,000 men and women showed up at the Centennial Boston Marathon in 1996.

The journalists’ skepticism led to a typical exchange when C. C. Pyle averred that he would have physicians examine the runners before they began the race.

“First, they will examine their feet,” said Pyle, prompting a guffaw from someone in the crowd. “What’s the idea?” demanded Pyle, who hadn’t thought he had said anything funny.

“Well, if a man enters a 3,000-mile foot race, the first thing to examine is his head.”

With such snickering, there was no chance that any self-respecting sportswriter could put the wordy, pretentious name in their articles day after day: “C. C. Pyle’s First Annual International Transcontinental Foot Race, From Los Angeles to New York.”

To avoid Pyle’s unwieldy title, a sportswriter came up with a short catchphrase, which everyone else adopted. It was based on the nation’s collective experience and history with foot problems. It was a nickname that stuck, that everyone eagerly embraced except C. C. Pyle. They called it the Bunion Derby.