

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Best of British

Jon Henderson

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MARK THOMAS is an award-winning illustrator. Over the past three decades his career has covered television, film, advertising and publishing. He lives in Surrey with his wife and daughters.

To Charlie, who died aged twenty-two as a result of
diabetes

He strode with gaiety and courage, contemptuous
of care, along the narrow crumbling ridge from
which he sensed he must inevitably fall, towards
the castle of his hopes. We watched with fearful
admiration.

JAMES HENDERSON

The author is donating his proceeds from this book to the
Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation
(www.jdrf.org.uk).

JON HENDERSON



BEST OF BRITISH
HENDO'S SPORTING HEROES

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK THOMAS



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INTRODUCTION

Friends of a cynical disposition thought it must have been a struggle to find 100 British sporting heroes. Not a bit of it. The difficulties I faced keeping the entries to that figure gave me a mild sense of guilt that at times during my journalistic career I might have been overly harsh on selectors. I did not even have to rely on heroes from the days when we Brits were unchallenged on the games field, the time when we were starting it all by 'frivolling at garden parties' - to quote Lottie Dod of these pages only slightly out of context - while the rest of the world was still being serious. We have never been short of sporting heroes, including today when we anguish over our failures and forget that sport's universality has inevitably diminished our share of champions. As I put the finishing touches to this volume, there are already impressive candidates for an updated version - cyclist Nicole Cooke, motor racer Lewis Hamilton, rowing's Andy Hodge, boxer Amir Khan, tennis player Andy Murray, football's Wayne Rooney and athlete Nicola Sanders, to name just a few. A far harder task than choosing the heroes - 102, in fact, as two combinations, the golfing Morrises and the ice skaters Torvill and Dean, are each counted as one - was the casting aside. David Beckham, Tom Finney, Geoff Hurst, Len Hutton, Ann Packer, Paula Radcliffe and Virginia Wade are among those who almost persuaded me to go for a greater number. Some of you may find it difficult to reconcile certain exclusions with those who have been chosen, but candidates were assessed not only on what they achieved

but what they achieved in relation to considerations such as opportunity, physical attributes and, given the title of this book, whether there was an heroic element. Several ways of ordering the heroes, drawn from Northern Ireland as well as the British mainland, would have made sense. Chronologically by date of birth seemed the best, although I have listed those born in the same year alphabetically. This way, when read from start to finish, the book has an historical narrative. Reader or dipper, you are welcome to this distillation of my lifetime's interest, which has kept me occupied over more than four decades while on the lookout for a proper job.

JON HENDERSON, July 2007



ROBIN HOOD

PART ONE



OUT OF THE GREENWOOD
1377-1764

ROBIN HOOD

— EARLIEST MENTION, c.1377 —

ROBIN HOOD'S name first crops up in *Piers Plowman*, written in or about 1377 - and more than six hundred years on the fabled figure is still with us, complete with lip-glossed squeeze Maid Marian, as a star of the big screen. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* addresses, with due solemnity, the question of whether there is any truth in the legend. 'For our part,' it concludes in a lengthy essay, 'we are not disinclined to believe that the Robin Hood story has some historical basis, however fanciful and romantic the superstructure ... He is the great sportsman, the incomparable archer, the lover of the greenwood and of a free life, brave, adventurous, jocular, open-handed, a protector of women.' This being so far removed from the lurid world of the twenty-first-century Premiership footballer should do nothing to diminish his claim to a place in the history of sport. Through the stories of Robin Hood we glimpse the first recognisable forms of modern sports, adapted from deadly martial pursuits such as archery and sword fighting. Municipal ranges were common across England after Edward III made archery practice compulsory in 1363, and deciding who could shoot farthest or straightest would have been as natural as setting fire to the village witch. Similarly, a way of determining the finest swordsmen that did not involve corpses almost certainly developed from fencing demonstrations at fairs and in market places. Robin Hood's ability as a bowman is a persistent theme of the legend, with two stories in particular recurring. One involves a 'proud potter' who beats Robin in a fight. The pair become friends and

exchange clothing so that Robin can go in disguise to Nottingham. Here he arouses the interest of the sheriff, a frequent victim of Robin's wealth-redistribution schemes, by performing brilliantly in an archery contest. Still impersonating the potter, Robin tricks the sheriff into going to the forest where he is relieved of his horse and other possessions. The second story is of the silver arrow contest outside the walls of Nottingham. A huge crowd watch the field being reduced to two: Robin and Gilbert with the White Hand, the sheriff's stooge. For the shoot-off, a willow wand replaces the target. Robin goes first and splits it; Gilbert misses. The presentation ceremony turns into a riot when Robin goes forward to accept the prize: an arrow with a silver tip and shaft. The sheriff, reneging on his promise to behave honourably, orders him to be seized. Robin fights his way free and escapes. Centuries later, archery becomes an Olympic sport.

HENRY VIII

— 1491-1547 —

HENRY VIII's competitive drive, a characteristic of ambitious second sons, showed no sign of diminishing when his older brother, Arthur, died in 1502. Henry was still ten at the time; seven years later on the death of his father, Henry VII, he was crowned king. The responsibilities of leading a nation with an expanding foreign policy, the distraction of internal strife caused by the Reformation and the demands of a complicated private life could not quell Henry's lust for action. This paragon of princes, as robust as Arthur had been sickly, sought other outlets - and in finding them laid claim to being the first and greatest of all-round sportsmen. He could bend a bow with the best foresters in the land, matching them at shooting at the butts (targets) and flight

shooting (distance). He was a champion at tennis - seeing him play was 'the prettiest thing in the world' in the view of the Venetian ambassador to London - and a joustier whose immense suit of tilting armour in the Tower of London gives a hint of his prowess in the lists. The Dutch humanist and scholar Erasmus reckoned he had seen no finer thrower of a hunting dart, having seen the King kill a deer with a single hit. He was so keen on bowling that he took a 90 feet by 8 feet indoor bowling shed with him on an expedition against France. He competed impressively at two-handed sword tournaments, the use of armour and blunted swords being encouraged to restrict fatalities, and loved to wrestle. His most famous wrestling match, against Francis I at the Field of the Cloth of Gold in northern France, ended in controversy. The English camp claimed Henry was felled by an illegal 'Breton trip' and did not report it; French chronicles made much of Francis's brilliant victory. Henry employed an Italian coach to help him perfect an early version of dressage, and gave hour-long demonstrations that included many elaborate manoeuvres, climaxing with a thousand jumps in the air. He had racing stables at Greenwich and Windsor and four jockeys who wore 'ryding cappes of blac veilute and 22 butons of golde to garish them'. On top of all this, he built some of the great sporting arenas of the age. His palaces at Greenwich and Whitehall included tiltyards for jousting, bowling alleys, tennis courts and cock pits.

JAMES FIGG

— 1695-1734 —

JAMES FIGG, the youngest of seven children born into a poor family in Oxfordshire in the late seventeenth century, was a sword and cudgel fighter, bare-knuckle pugilist and friend

of royalty. His main legacy was as a fist fighter and he is regarded as the first champion boxer, having established supremacy over all his great rivals, men such as Tim Buck, Tom Stokes and Bill Flanders. In a three-instalment fight with one of his fiercest challengers, Ned Smith of Gravesend, Figg won with sword, fists and cudgel. With an element of wrestling still allowed, Figg grappled Smith to defeat in the fist fight after being flattened by a punch. His reputation established by 1719, Figg received backing from his patron, the Earl of Peterborough, to establish a school of arms on what is now Tottenham Court Road in central London. Recreational fighting was growing in popularity and the enterprise was soon a major attraction, especially for groups of noblemen who were particularly keen to find outlets for their aggression. As Figg's fame grew, the artist William Hogarth designed his business card, which introduced him as 'master of the noble science of defence'. Hogarth also put his new pugilist friend in his engravings *Rake's Progress* and *Southwark Fair*. Later, Figg built an amphitheatre to stage prizefights that attracted such large crowds that he introduced the forerunner of today's boxing ring, raised and enclosed with wooden rails. His own services as a fighter were much in demand and at Southwark Fair he fought regularly in a booth against anyone who dared to challenge him. He also defended his championship in formal contests before retiring undefeated in 1730. His standing was such that he joined the Prince of Wales's royal circle where he hobnobbed with his Highness and other blue bloods. He died leaving a large family and the general recognition of his having been 'The Father of Boxing'. His death was recorded in all the newspapers of the day, including one notice that began: 'Last Saturday there was a Trial of Skill between the unconquered Hero, Death, on the one side and the till then unconquered Hero Mr James Figg, the famous Prize-Fighter and Master of the Noble Science of Defence on the other ...'



ECLIPSE

— 1764-1789 —

ALONE AMONG the heroes in these pages, Eclipse is included for the vigour of his seed. But he is also a candidate as an exceptional racehorse. He started racing when he was five and was unbeaten in eighteen starts between May 1769 and October 1770, his rider supposedly never having to resort to whip or spurs. He was so good that he prompted one of racing's most enduring utterances, 'Eclipse first, and the rest nowhere', from his incorrigible Irish owner, Dennis O'Kelly. In making it, O'Kelly correctly predicted that the opposition would not be credited with a place, which was the custom if a horse lost by more than a distance (240 yards) in races that were invariably four miles or more. Eclipse's ability was such that absurd claims were made on his behalf, including one that he galloped at the rate of a mile a minute. A more sober assessment was provided by the breeding expert Tom Morris, who referred to him as 'unsurpassed in achievement as athlete and progenitor'. It is in the second of these capacities that Eclipse unquestionably stands out, with proof of the provenance of his extended family beyond reproach. The markings are still there for all to see. Foaled on 1 April 1764, a day on which the moon passed between the earth and the sun,

Eclipse was a chestnut with a white blaze down his face, an off hind leg that was white from the hock down and with black spots on his rump that, in particular, have survived as a certifying hallmark. Scientists from the Royal Veterinary College delved deeper. In 2005, they reconstructed one of Eclipse's legs to try to unlock the secret of why he was so dominant. The surprising conclusion was that he was smaller than modern racehorses. 'Rather than being some freak of nature with incredible properties,' said the man who led the study, Dr Alan Wilson, 'he was actually just right in absolutely every way.' On the breeding side, the RVC established that nearly 80 per cent of thoroughbred racehorses running today can trace their ancestry back to Eclipse in the male line and most of those that cannot have him in their pedigree. The case, therefore, is overwhelming that a large majority of the great champions are members of the Eclipse family. The entire field for the 2006 Derby was directly related, as were those for the French and Kentucky Derbys. Nor is it just champions of the flat that share a genetic path back to Eclipse. Two of the great jumping champions of the twentieth century, Arkle and Desert Orchid, had this most famous of impregnators to thank for supplying them with the wherewithal to run and leap quite so capably.



DANIEL MENDOZA

PART TWO

RULES BRITANNIA
1764–1847

DANIEL MENDOZA

— 1764-1836 —

DANIEL MENDOZA was said to have changed the image of Jews in England as radically as he did the art of boxing. Proud to call himself Mendoza the Jew, his feats as a prizefighter - beating much larger men by placing skill above brute force - helped to end the stereotyping of his people as vulnerable and undeserving of respect. He was born and raised in London's East End, where he had a number of jobs, including as an actor. When he turned to prizefighting, Mendoza, who was only 5 feet 7 inches and 160 pounds, forsook the slugging and mauling style that had been popular in the sport's early days. Instead he employed a more scientific approach, which he advocated in published works such as *The Art of Boxing*. Typically, he wrote: 'If your adversary aims all round blows, which is generally the case with a man ignorant of Boxing, you should strike straight forward, as a direct line reaches its target sooner than one which is circular.' His first recorded fight was a knockout victory over Harry the Coalheaver, whom he beat in 40 rounds. He soon earned the patronage of the Prince of Wales, later George IV, and was reckoned to be the first Jew to speak to George III. Three bitter fights against Richard Humphries between 1788 and 1790 made him widely known. He lost the first, possibly as the result of Humphries's second stepping forward to block a blow, but won the other two, the third one marking the first time English spectators paid to watch a sporting event. He won the title of English champion with victories over Bill Warr in 1792 at Smitham Bottom, near Croydon, and in 1794 on Bexley Common. He lost the title to 'Gentleman' John

Jackson in 1795. Jackson, who was 42 pounds heavier, employed his greater bulk and a move that was still permitted, holding an opponent's hair with one hand while hitting him with the other, to win in nine rounds. In later life, Mendoza earned a living as landlord of the Admiral Nelson in Whitechapel and, as he informed the public in a letter to *The Times* in 1807, as a teacher of his scientific method of boxing. Financial problems forced him into occasional comebacks, the last of them when he was fifty-six. He died, deeply in debt, aged seventy-two.

ROBERT BARCLAY

— 1779-1854 —

LEFT TO THEIR OWN devices, athletic types have always improvised ways to demonstrate their prowess. Perhaps the epitome of this breed was Captain Robert Barclay. He made his name in the days before games were defined by rules and when prize money and gambling had started to offer financial inducements. Barclay, who became the sixth Laird of Ury, in 1797, aged seventeen, was physically robust from childhood. One nineteenth-century chronicler described him as 'a man whose pride and pleasure it was to exhibit the physical potentialities of human nature in their highest stretch'. His father, an MP, filled him with tales of prizefighting and acts of strength and endurance from an early age. His fascination developed into a passion to be involved himself after he was sent from Scotland to school near London. Here he gained first-hand knowledge of what for him was a heady mix of games and gaming. In time, his repertoire included lifting great weights. He was credited with raising 1,176 pounds and lifting a 240-pound man in the palm of one hand. Where he really surpassed all others, though, was in speed and endurance walking - and

profiting from the accompanying wagers. He was still at school when he set out to cover six miles in less than an hour. Doing this with 'fair toe and heel' contact with the ground is not easy, but young Barclay managed it comfortably to secure his 100 guineas, the surprisingly large amount sanctioned by his father. This was the start of a series of walking feats that culminated in the one that established his reputation - walking one mile every hour of every day until he had completed 1,000 miles in 1,000 hours. He accomplished this unprecedented feat in 1809 on Newmarket Heath with wagers piling up to an estimated 16,000 guineas, a colossal sum for those days. Towards the finish, the crowds swelled to such a size that the area where he walked had to be roped off. At 3.15 p.m. on the final day of an ordeal that had taken him to the very limits of his stamina, Barclay set out on the 1,000th mile. There were 45 minutes left. He finished 23 minutes inside his deadline. The crowd went wild, the church bells pealed. The walk had been meticulously planned and so was his recovery. That night he was woken at midnight for a light meal because of the perils of sleeping deeply for too long after extreme exertion. Eight days later he left Ramsgate with his regiment to fight the French. He remained supremely fit and was in his seventies when he made his host at a dinner party, 'a fully adult man of more than 12 stone', stand on his right palm before lifting him on to the table. He died after being kicked in the head while trying to break in a pony.

GEORGE BYRON

— 1788-1824 —

GEORGE BYRON, who was ten when he became sixth Baron Byron of Rochdale in 1798, had a passion for sport that a