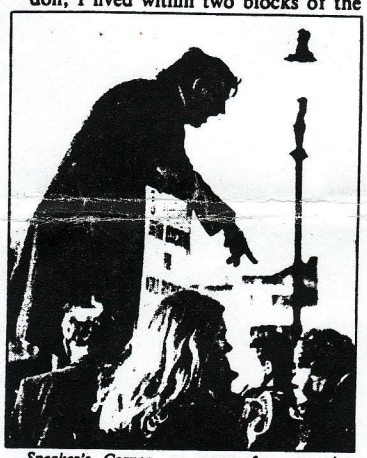
by James A. Clapp, Ph.D.

Running Through History in LONDON'S HYDE

For the intrepid runner for whom daily mileage is as much a part of the rhythm of the day as brushing your teeth, a vacation or work assignment in another city or country necessarily involves consideration of available, safe, and interesting places to run.

While conducting research in London, I lived within two blocks of the city's famed Hyde Park for the express purpose of there maintaining my daily three- to five-mile run. The consideration of a pleasant running route carried an added bonus—a history lesson, at first hand, moving from the days of Henry VIII to the twilight of the British Empire in the course of a daily workout.



Speaker's Corner, an arena for outspoken citizens, is one of Hyde Park's best-known spots.

Britain's capital, like many other European cities, creates difficulties for the American runner who often uses streets and sidewalks for running routes. London sidewalks are generally narrow and more crowded with pedestrians (though unlike, say, Rome, dog droppings are less of a nuisance). London's streets are even more difficult for an American runner. Traffic is furious and, since the British drive on the left, crossing a street or negotiating an intersection requires training yourself to look in the opposite direction from which you are accustomed, something requiring an annoying amount of concentration.

Find a Park

The best solution for the runner who finds him- or herself in London is to take a hotel, flat, or "bed-and-breakfast" near one of its several fine parks. Moreover, I recommend residential proximity to a park because, since most tourists or short-time visitors to London do not rent cars (parking and driving on the left being the major impediments), and traveling on a double-decker bus or London "tube" (subway) in your running gear will elicit some curious glances from the bowler-hatted and "brolly"-carrying officials and businessmen on their journeys to Whitehall or Fleet Street.

London has several beautiful parks: Regents Park in the northwest has a zoo and gardens, and Green and St. James' Parks, adjoining Buckingham Palace, are also beautiful and centrally located. But, for both size and historical interest, Hyde Park is best for the runner.

Before turning to the particulars of the history-filled running routes that Hyde Park affords, a few preparatory points of general interest and background are worth noting. Situated in London's West End, though very much centrally located, Hyde Park merges imperceptibly with Kensington Gardens to form more than 630 acres of unspoiled woodlands, grassy expanses, water bodies, and historic monuments, criss-crossed by asphalt paths. Like New York's Central Park, it is totally ringed by roads and surrounded by urban development, offering an interesting and dramatic contrast between natural and man-made environments.

Hyde, a royal park, is still owned by England's sovereign, but you don't need royal permission to use it. It can be entered from various points, but the north side, along Bayswater Road (where, on Sundays, the runner may also pause to take in the sidewalk art show that runs for several hundred yards) is easiest. The park is divided in the middle by the Serpentine Pond, a long water body for rowing and swimming, and a portion of the Ring Road that allows cars and cabs to cross it, though they pose virtually no impediment to the runner.

The Crown acquired Hyde Park in 1536 and Henry VIII used it as his private hunting preserve, but it was James I who opened it to the public. Queen Victoria opened the Kensington Gardens portion to "all respectably dressed persons"; it is too late to inquire of her majesty whether running attire applies. In the 1640's, during the Civil Wars, it bristled with fortifications (since removed) built by Parliament, which 300 years later were echoed by anti-aircraft artillery during the London blitz of World War II. In between, there has been much additional history, to which we may now turn by way of a pleasant and enlightening run of about 5.5 miles.

Soapbox Starting Point

We can begin at one of the park's best known features, Speaker's Corner (No. 1 on the map), a rather interesting place to do some stretching if you are running on a Sunday morning. On Sundays this famed area, at the northeast corner of the park, is London's monument to free speech. While stretching, you might listen in on the often impassioned oratory of the area's several soapbox speakers. Topics may include a plea for a socialist revolution, calls for abolition of the monarchy, suggestions for revival of the British Empire, the always popular "repent, the end of the world is at hand," or numerous other provocative and frequently humorous speeches. The informal podium is open to anyone with something to say (although you may have to contend with hecklers); so, if you are inclined, you may offer an oration on the benefits of running.

Once the site of a mock 19th century naval battle, the Serpentine now is used for quiet swimming and boating.

Easily seen from Speaker's Corner is Marble Arch (2), at the corner of Oxford Street and Park Lane, the latter street once famed for some of the most expensive and fashionable residences in London and now lined on the west side by the plushest of London hotels. The arch was designed in 1828 by John Nash as a gateway to Buckingham Palace (it now is opened only for royalty), but was subsequently moved to its present location. The site, in fact, is more famous than the arch.

While you're stretching for your run, you may reflect on a different sort of stretching that used to take place here—the necks of criminals and other rogues at the gallows that once stood there when the location was called Tyburn. Public executions were popular events in the old days; the highwayman Jack Sheppard drew a crowd of 20,000 for his hanging. Many others were forgers, murderers, and pickpockets. Cromwell was, perhaps, the most renowned; but, in his case, the event was strictly ceremonial, since the mob demanded the digging-up of his long dead body so they could witness his redundant hanging.

It is also noteworthy that the park was a popular site for duels, of which there were 172 during the reign of George III, 66 of which ended in fatalities.

The Serpentine

That is enough grisly history to set anyone to running, so we may now set off in a southeasterly direction toward the Serpentine. This section of the park is a large expanse of grass, criss-crossed with walking paths on which the runner may choose a variety of routes to vary his or her perspective on the surrounding parts of the city or of the impromptu weekend soccer matches.

If we set out along the "North Ride" (an equestrian path), there is an opportunity to test our pace against the horsemen who use this area's sandy path to train their horses in a variety of intricate gaits. A left turn to the southwest takes us toward the Serpentine, passing enroute the bird sanctuary (3).

The Serpentine (4)—owing to its shape, it would be more aptly named the Scimitar—was, up until 1860, an open sewer that flowed toward the Thames River. In 1814, it was the scene of a mock-up Battle of the Nile to celebrate the naval victory over Napoleon. Today, it is used for swimming and

PARK

boating in the summer and skating when the now-less-severe winters freeze it over, all shared with a variety of water fowl.

At the Serpentine, a left turn along its northern banks sets us in the direction of the park's military monuments. At the southeast corner of the park, we encounter a 23-foot bronze statue of Achilles (5) by Sir Richard Westmacott, dedicated to the Duke of Wellington and cast from cannon taken in the duke's various victories. This area, called Hyde Park Corner, is almost totally given over to the hero of Waterloo. Across the road we can see Apsley House (6), Wellington's home (now a museum) until his death in 1852, and, beyond it, the Wellington Arch (7).

At this point, about a mile-and-a-quarter into the run, a right turn to the west takes us along Rotten Row (a corruption of the Route de Roi or King William III's route from St. James Palace to Kensington Palace at the far west end of the park). In the early morning, there is a good chance of encountering members of the Queen's Household Cavalry exercising their mounts along Rotten Row. This cavalry unit, which may be seen in their splendid livery when the guard changes at Buckingham Palace or, at closer range, in their mounted sentry boxes along Whitehall, maintains its barracks (8) along the southern edge of the park.

Victorian Monument

A half mile further to the west, we come upon a fascinating symbol of the British Empire. The Prince Albert Memorial (9), completed by architect Sir George Gilbert Scott in 1876, is a gaudy, Victorian Gothic monument to Queen Victoria's Prince Consort, made of Italian marble inlaid with agate, jasper, carnelian, crystal, and other richly colored stones. If we slow our pace to circle it, we may gain a closer inspection of the four groups of marble statues at the corners of the base, each representing the four corners of the Empire—Asia, Europe, Africa, and America. The prince sits above, under a wrought iron canopy, gazing across the road at the dome of Royal Albert Hall (10), which can hold up to 8,000 people for concerts, sporting events, and other mass meetings.

In 1851, this section of the park contained the Crystal Palace (shortly thereafter destroyed by fire) of the great international Exposition, one of Albert's many achievements during his service to the Empire.

Continuing westward to the Palace Gate and then turning north (about half a mile), we arrive at Kensington Palace (11), acquired by William III in 1689. By palace standards, Kensington is rather unpalatial, certainly no Versailles. It is today inhabited by royal relations, most notably Princess Margaret and her children, but there are several rooms open to the public. When she was living there, the young Princess Victoria was visited by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who informed her that she had become the Queen of England. Her rooms, containing artifacts from her childhood, and the many famous paintings in the Royal Collection, make a return visit obligatory.

Hyde Park is dotted with military monuments heralding British heroes and conquests.

If we circle around the west end of the Palace, a look to the left provides a rear-yard view of the enormous mansions along Kensington Palace Gardens (12), a street containing a number of foreign embassies, including that of the Soviet Union. A quick turn at the corner of the palace takes us past the Orangery (13), a bright, airy solarium building for the growing and display of a variety of plants. (Both the Orangery and the palace gardens are open to the public.) Straight ahead, across the Broad Walk, likes the Round Pond (14), actually a large, shallow pool, used by miniature sailboat enthusiasts (the poet Shelley was once seen here sailing paper boats) in fair weather and by geese and ducks through much of the year.

Taking the northward path for another 300 yards, we come upon an obelisk dedicated to John Hanning Speke (15), who was credited with the discovery of the source of the Nile in 1858. A right turn for some distance brings us to an equestrian statue titled Physical Energy (16), sculpted by G. F. Watts in 1907. If more modern sculpture is to your liking, in another few hundred yards, several large works by famed sculptor Henry Moore come into view in the grounds of the Serpentine Gallery (17), a small gallery exhibiting the works of a variety of contemporary artists.

A left turn down a grassy knoll takes us to the path along the western side of the Serpentine, a pleasant path immediately beside the water that affords, enroute, a close-up view of the Peter Pan sculpture by George Frampton (18). From there, a right turn at the fountains at the head of the Serpentine, another half-mile or so, returns us to Speaker's Corner, completing a run of approximately 5.5 miles and a short course in British history.

The time, of course, depends on your running pace; but, if you're inclined to stretch the facts somewhat when trading running stories with those back home, you can always claim you started out in the time of Henry VIII, a mere four-and-one-half centuries ago.

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HYDE PARK, LONDON