

The Fasting marches – don't forget the historic triumphs

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The eleven fasting walkers walked from Gothenburg to Stockholm, 50 kilometers a day for ten days. They only drank water which makes this event one of the health movements most noticed triumphs. Ten years later the dentist Lennart Edrén led the fasting march number two from Kalmar to Stockholm. What happened during this time and what the marches learned us, is worth rescuing from the mist of time.

About the first fasting march 1954 from Gothenburg to Stockholm:

The tenth of August almost 60 years ago one of the biggest triumphs in the health movements history were celebrated. Eleven fasting marchers walked through Stockholm to Skansen after ten days of being the top news in all Swedish newspapers.

The streets of Stockholm, from Hornstull to Skansen were completely blocked by people observing the triumph. At the Solliden-stage, Skansen, waited another 5000 people.

The ovations were moving. I especially remember an older blue-collar worker who stood close to the marchers at Slussen, and when we got closer he took off his hat while we passed by.

But not everyone knew about the march. In Midsommarkransen south of Stockholm a motorcyclist stopped and asked the leader of the group, Lennart Edrén if he knew any place to eat in the area. No, Lennart answered, "We haven't eaten anything in ten days"

During their march from Gothenburg the walkers had not consumed anything else than clean water. The aim of the study was to show the body's extreme resources and increase feeling of safety when using fast as therapy.

To try if it was really possible to walk this far so many days in a row only drinking water, the organizer of the march, the dentist Lennart Edrén had tried several of the phases of the march in advance. He had done it mostly by walking round and round on a sporting ground in Stockholm and used this monotonous experiment in walking to read literature concerning his profession, among those the most discussed Vipeholms-study.

In the beginning most of the press discarded the project as an exercise in PR. Only Aftonbladet took the march seriously. The press sent out experts who already had a negative opinion about the march and its goals. A couple of researchers discarded the march as being "pure madness" (for example Professor U. von Eulen). "An experiment impossible to defend" said the sport physician Gösta Karlsson in Dagens Nyheter. "Only a few will reach the goal" said the physician Leopold Turitz and the physician Arne Tallberg called the march "a slap in the face for us physicians".

But the marchers continued towards Stockholm, and over time the press started to change opinion. This culminated in the peoples welcome in Stockholm. Then the headlines read things like “triumph”.

All the marchers were vegetarians. They had lost weight between 7 and 10 kilo. But the resilience and happiness were high and did not fade.

The fasting march were an unique success for natural therapy. And now you could see that there were no panic for starving when people got lost or isolated otherwise, during avalanches et cetera.

But this therapy did not influence medical care. After ten years Lennart Edrén summoned a new group to march the equally far way between Kalmar and Stockholm. Another march ending in triumph, but where the result unfortunately have not been used. To this march an extensive study was connected. They study's goal was to try to pinpoint what happens in the marchers metabolism during fast and march.

Fasting march 2, betrayal and triumph

About the fasting march 1964 between Kalmar and Stockholm. 500 kilometers, 19 participants:

1964, ten year after the first fasting march, the dentist Lennart Edrén, this time with 19 participants, another test of stamina during fast. Like the first time, the participants had 500 kilometers to walk on foot.

This time the march was more directed towards helping the research about fast as a therapeutical instrument.

Instead of water, the marchers drank a glass of juice (råsaft) every day and also some supplements of vitamins and minerals. In the beginning of the march they also drank a glass of vegetable bouillon every day, but they stopped serving it because Lennart Edrén estimated it to be too salt. During this march, five of the participants where meat eaters. Would they react differently? The other fourteen were vegetarians. The answer to the question was no. The meat eaters had more troubles with harm to feets et cetera because they were less used to walking far. But they managed the fasting without major problems.

The biggest change compared to the first march was that they now were monitored almost around the clock by sport physician Björn Ekblom (later Professor) and a nurse. They worked for professor Bengt Saltin of The Swedish school of sport and health science. The marcher that finished first and last every day was weighted and had to do a round on a test bike. They were also to rise early for breathing tests et cetera. During the walks they were stopped to collect blood samples, check pulse. During some parts they wore face mask and a sack on their back to collect exhalation.

The great betrayal

Det stora undersökningsarbetet förorsakade försenade morgonstarter och tidsförluster efter vägen och ökade den påfrestning gångarna fick utstå. Men gångarna bar denna plåga med gott humör ända från start fram till de väntande folkmassorna vid Kungsträdgårdens scen på den tionde dagens kväll.

These parts of the research caused late morning starts, heavier pressure on the marchers and also lost time. But they put up with these problems with a good mood until the end of the march in

Kungsträdgården, after ten days.

But if the marchers had known that the samples that were sent to Bengt Saltin only were to be put away in a freezer without ever being analyzed, they would have been less positive to the cooperation. But it was first in retrospect that this betrayal was discovered and Lennart Edrén was the one being most afflicted. Lennarts tremendous efforts and cost missed the target he aimed for.

The sun shone over us

But despite this there were many positive experiences. We learned how people could cope with a massive physical workload during long time without losing physical capacity and psychological balance and an increased security during dangerous situations in the wild. Another experience was how fast foot- and leg injuries healed during continued walking. But also how old wounds could heal during a continuous movement. Not the least one of the walkers tells us the story of how he suddenly during the fourth day of the fast could smell the raspberries growing at the roadside. He had since long ago lost the ability to register smell. Another case I wrote about in "Tidskrift för Hälsa" (Magazine for health) started with the headline "Where did his ulcers go". But strengthening of the senses during fast was what most of the marchers spoke about.

De flesta kunde berätta om ökad lätthet i kroppen men särskilt i tankeförmågan. Bäst sammanfattade kanske Stelke Maurys, civilingenjör från Finland. När han svarade på min fråga om vad han hade upplevt som bäst på sin ovana marsch:

Most of them told us about a sense of lightness in the body, but especially in the mind. Stelke Maurys, civil engineer from Finland, described what had happened during his first march like this.

"To walk there and meditate, whistle and sing and to be happy. That was best. And to walk among friends with rich and giving conversations. That was best. Actually – a lot of things were good."

Och i min Tidskrift för Hälsa kunde jag i en huvudrubrik: med god motivering låna Povel Ramels ord

"Och över alltihopa lyste moder sol".

And in "Tidskrift för hälsa" I could use the heading borrowed from the songwriter Povel Ramel. "And over us shone mother sun"

Eskil Svensson

What happens on the seventh day of fast?

Better condition – you can see that on the pulse.

The pulse during walking was faster during the first six days, but on the seventh it sank from 154 to 147 and continued to stay on that level. Even three to four weeks after the fast the pulse in general was lower. The lower the pulse the better the stamina.