

## A brief history of race walking

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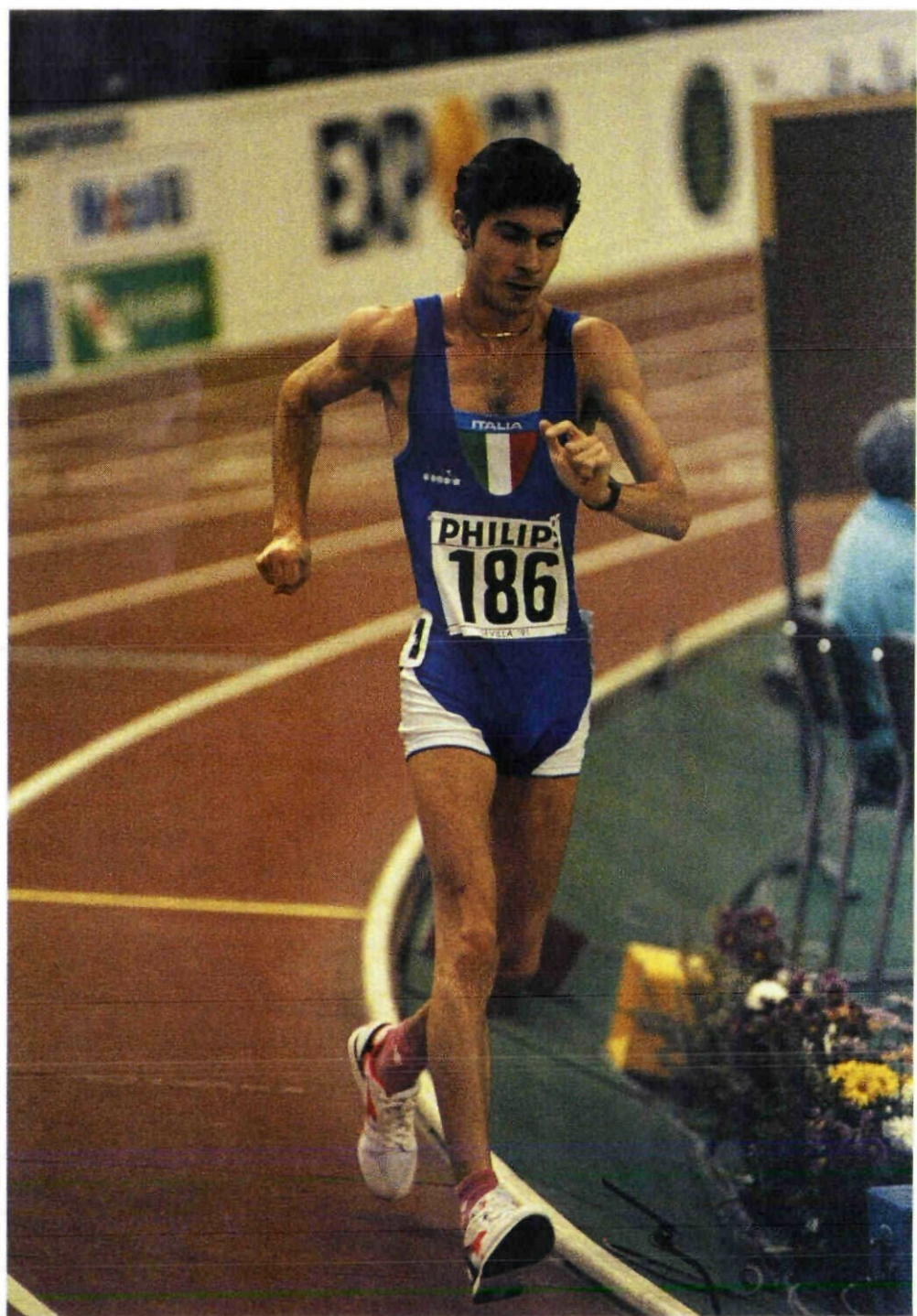
“ The author outlines the evolution of race walking from its origination, when competitions were staged mainly for cash wagers, to the present day, when it constitutes an Olympic event with specific rules and regulations. ”

Of the athletic disciplines, race walking has probably seen more changes and more controversy in its lifetime than any other event in the official programme.

True, one can look at other events and cite major changes and revolutionary developments. For instance, there have been enormous changes in the pole vault from the days when vaulters flirted with danger using bamboo poles to scale such dizzy heights as 13 feet (4 metres) to the present when we see ever refined fibre glass, or carbon poles bending and catapulting athletes over six metres. The javelin too has progressed from wooden spears to aerodynamically designed light weight metal projectiles, the specifications of which were recently altered because distances achieved were placing spectators in danger. But race walking's long development through history and its contentious nature make it a special discipline which fortunately remains among the internationally accepted athletic events.

Great Britain will, of course, claim to be the originators of race walking. There certainly is much evidence to show that the early development of the sport took place in Britain. No doubt, however, other nations will also lay some claim to having pioneered walking. The Italians and their Roman Legions? South Africans and the Boor Trekkers? Let us accept, however, that the true sport of race walking began with the

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pedestrianism achievement races for cash wagers that took place in Britain, mainly in the eighteenth century and before.

We know, for instance, of Sir Robert Carey, who walked from London to Berwick in the year 1589 to win a large wager, and King Charles II who was noted for his walks from Whitehall to Hampton Court. In 1670, the King and his nobles watched Lord Digby attempt to walk five miles within the hour on Newmarket Heath, for a wager of £50. He failed by half a minute, walking barefooted. A Mr Robert Bartley of Hurford, Norfolk, born in 1790, frequently walked the 81 miles from Thetford to London. In 1762, a Mr Child walked 44 miles in 7 hours 57 minutes on Wimbledon Common and in the same year, a Mr John Haque walked 100 miles in 23 hours 15 minutes. Captain Barclay Allardice, a Scotsman born in 1779 and better known as Captain Barclay, was famous for the many walking and running feats he undertook, nearly always for wagers. In 1808, he was contracted to walk 1000 miles in 1000 consecutive hours. The event started on June 1st 1809 and ended on July 12th, Captain Barclay's reward was 1000 guineas.

Many others also brought the intricacies of walking to the public notice, but one of the best known was Charles Westhall, who, in the late 19th Century, about the time when the Amateur Athletic Association of England and Wales was formed, was reported to have walked seven miles in 54 minutes at Newmarket Heath. W. Griffin managed eight miles and 172 yards in an hour at Lillie Bridge Track. But it was not all happening in Britain. In 1882, in New York, USA, J. Meaghen was reported to have walked eight miles 302 yards in one hour. One could go on forever about the exploits in years gone by, but, of course, in those days most of the walks were of an endurance kind with the walkers not having to contend with rules, regulations and judges.

Now, of course, the major athletic events on the international calendar are the Olympic

Games and the IAAF World Championships in Athletics. The first walks were included in the Games of 1908 in London when George Larnar of Great Britain won the 3,500 metres track race in 14 minutes 55 seconds and the 10 mile track race in 1 hour 15 minutes 57.4 seconds.

In Stockholm, in 1912, there was only a 10,000 metre track race. That race saw a certain amount of controversy as there were so many disqualifications that only four men finished, Goulding of Canada winning in 46 minutes 28.4 seconds.

Two track walks appeared again in Antwerp in 1920 with Frigerio of Italy winning both the 3000 metres in 13 minutes 14.2 seconds and the 10,000 metres in 48 minutes 06.2 seconds.

In Paris, in 1924, the judging controversy really came to the fore. Only one race was held, a 10,000 metre track race, which Frigerio of Italy won in 47 minutes 49 seconds. However, judging problems in the heats led to the resignation of the judges panel and a new panel had to be found for the final.

After walking was ruled out of the 1928 games British officials were mainly responsible for getting it back into the 1932 games in Los Angeles. This time a 50 kilometre road race was decided upon, in which 15 competitors from 10 nations took part. Tommy Green the diminutive British walker won by nearly 7 minutes in a time of 4 hours 50 minutes 10 seconds.

In 1936 in Berlin, 33 competitors from 16 nations lined up in the 50 kilometre road race which was again won by a Briton; this time Harold Whitlock, in a time of 4 hours 30 minutes 41.4 seconds.

The 1948 Games in London saw the return of a track walk with 19 competitors from 10 countries taking part over 10,000 metres. The winner was Mikaelsson of Sweden in a time of 45 minutes 13.2 seconds. The 50 km road event saw another Swedish walker, Ljunggren the victor in 4 hours 41 minutes 52 seconds.

In the 1952 Games in Helsinki the 10,000 metres track event and 50 km road event were again included, winners being Mikaelsson of Sweden and Dordoni of Italy respectively.

In the Melbourne Games in 1956 the present format of 20 km and 50 km road events was introduced. We also saw the increasing emergence of the eastern bloc athletes, Spirine (URS) winning the 20 km and Maskinkov (URS) finishing second to Read of New Zealand in the longer event.

In the 1970s controversy again returned as the 50 km was dropped from the Montreal Games and the walks were almost lost to the Olympics. However, pressure from devotees of the sport won the day and the events remain. The strength of the sport's growing popularity is shown by the fact that for the 1992 Games in Barcelona a

women's 10 km event will be included for the first time.

Of great importance to race walkers, and a big step forward in obtaining international security for the events, was the introduction of the Lugano Trophy in 1961. This competition, now called the IAAF World Race Walking Cup, is held every two years over the two Olympic distances, 20 km and 50 km. The prime object is the team competition with aggregate scores from the two events deciding the winner. The first meeting was won by Great Britain, who then dominated for some years. In recent years USSR, GDR, Germany, Italy and Mexico have led the way. In 1975 a women's 5 km event was added and called the Eschborn Cup. Again, the first meeting was won by Great Britain with the Soviet Union and China now dominating the event. □