

## THE MEXICO WALKS

By  
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The starters for the 10,000m run came down the tunnel and onto the track to the cheers of the competitors. Sitting next to me at the edge of the track was Tom Dooley, one of the USA 20 Kilo boys, chatting brightly as usual as the field got away.

By the 800m mark the field was breaking up and some of the runners were already finding breathing difficult. As one after another collapsed onto the grass and were being given oxygen, Tom became quieter and his face was grim. When Rudy Haluza remarked "That's us tomorrow night", Tom didn't answer but walked silently away.

There were a lot of quiet athletes at the village that night – Ron Clarke's collapse caused concern in the Australian camp particularly. Although no one looked forward to the walk the next day, the general attitude was one of determination to be either carried off or win.

After the 20 Kilo, it was obvious that the effect on walkers had been different to the runners, with no collapses during the race but several at the finish. The Russians Golubnichy and Smaga walked a good race, together in the lead and only separated in the last 200 metres when the Mexican idol Jose Pedraza hurtled down the tunnel and along the back straight to overtake Smaga near the final bend. With a quick look over his shoulder, Golubnichy sprinted, holding off Pedraza in a close finish. For the Russian, it was the seal to his greatness, following on his gold medal from Freeman in Rome, and a bronze medal, again just beating Noel Freeman in Tokyo.



*Golubnichy holds off Pedraza in the final straight*

Back in the field, the world's greatest walkers struggled, finishing in times that wouldn't win a club race, Golubnichy being the only man to break 94 minutes. Frank Clark, despite the severe stomach cramps that unexpectedly hit many, battled on to come in 16<sup>th</sup>, walking hard and fairly, in the slowest but toughest ever 20 Kilo.

The 50 Kilo course began with a few solid hill sections up till 20 Kilo, and the blazing sun and thin air took their toll after a solid first 20 Kilo in 50:58, the pace dropping by a minute in the next 5,000 metres. Bunched together in the lead were the top men in the field. Britain's Paul Nihill took the pace, looking very confident, with Nermerich of West Germany bobbing alongside him, later to be disqualified. The Russians, Agapov, built like a tank, and Grigorjev, walked shoulder to shoulder with Delarue of France and Tokyo gold medallist Pamich already looking strained. Of the formidable East German trio, Leuschke (4<sup>th</sup> Tokyo) was the only one feeling the heat, with brilliant young Selzer moving nicely and Hohne, who had cleaned up most of the big races since 1966, tucked in quietly in the middle of the bunch.

At 10 Kilo, I was in his shadow but by 15, I had lost ground and faded back through the field to totter along and finish 19<sup>th</sup>, after being passed by Frank who sat back in a good position early and let the field come back to him, taking 12<sup>th</sup> in 4 hrs 40 min.

The route was not barricaded and the cadets by the roadside had little control over the spectators as they swarmed over the road to surround Pedraza. At one stage, Frank was forced to pummel a path through them. Paul Nihill, silver medallist in Tokyo, who started favourite by my reckoning, took the pace to 35 Kilo, collapsed at 42 and was carried off a bitterly disappointed man.

For me, the last 10 Kilo was walked in darkness, with people wandering across the course. Pamich retired early in the race, then Leuschke, Della Rossa, Agapov and, with myself and Delarue well back at the finish, only three of the early leaders were amongst the first 14. Christoph Hohne, reputed to have done 4.14 at altitude before Mexico, won in 4.20.13, Hungarian veteran Kiss was 2<sup>nd</sup>, 10 minutes behind, with Larry Young USA coming home well after a slow start. Peter Selzer took 4<sup>th</sup>, showing the potential that will make him a world star shortly.



*Christoph Hohne wins the 50km in Mexico*

Finally, sitting in the dressing room with a blanket around your shoulder, it's hard to believe that for you the Olympics are over, and for some athletes, finished forever as far as competing is concerned. The race that was so important, that you dreamed of and planned for years, is done and finished and is now part of the past.

Of course it wasn't all hard work for Bob. I found this newspaper cutting in my archives, showing him relaxing before the 50km walk.



THEY'RE GLAD to put their feet up. Australians Bob Gardner (left), who will compete in the 50-kilometre walk, and sprinter Gregory Lewis rest their feet on one of the statues that decorate the Olympic Village in Mexico City. 2.10.68

By way of postscript, fast forward to November 2016 when 4 of the 1968 Olympic walkers met once again in the World Masters Championships in Perth. From left to right, 50km winner Christoph Hohne (GDR), 50km 10<sup>th</sup> place finisher Goetz Klopfer (USA), 20km 17<sup>th</sup> place finisher Tom Dooley (USA) and 50km 19<sup>th</sup> place finisher Bob Gardiner (AUS).



*Mexico Olympians Christoph Hohne, Goetz Klopfer, Tom Dooley and Bob Gardiner meet once again in Perth in 2016*