

CHRISTOPH HÖHNE, BERND KANNENBERG AND THE STORY OF TWO OLYMPIC 50KM CHAMPS

The 1968 Olympics, Mexico City

The 1968 Olympic Games arguably remain the most controversial of all time. Commercialism first became an issue in the form of sponsorship and the wearing of branded running shoes (Nike and Adidas). The Black Power movement was beginning to find a voice. The Warsaw Bloc countries had invaded Czechoslovakia. The Mexican government had brutally put down riots over the poor living conditions of the impoverished population. And finally the altitude of Mexico City (7,347 feet above sea level) was the main topic of discussion for months before the Games. Many sports commentators were predicting deaths in the endurance events and much attention was focussed on the marathon and long walks.

But if there were concerns about the altitude, it did not deter the athletes and good fields of 33 and 36 walkers contested the two racewalks.

Having “blown up” in 1964, East German **Christoph Höhne** was determined to rectify his Tokyo mistake. He had won the 1965 and 1967 Lugano Cup 50km events, was the holder of the official world track record (4:10:51.8, Potsdam, 16/05/1965) and held the fastest ever official road time of 4:03:14. He looked unbeatable on paper and he was to be unbeatable on the road.

The weather was hot - a maximum temperature of 85°F - and the bitumen road surface reflected heat like an oven top. Höhne, **Paul Nihill** and **Gennadiy Agapov** led out from the gun, with Nihill holding a two second advantage at 20km. Agapov had begun to fall back by 25km and Nihill went in the next 5km, both men eventually overcome by the heat and altitude. Höhne's margin at 30km was 1:53, by 40km it was 4:58 and was a whopping 10:03.4 by the finish, the largest margin in Olympic history. Hungarian **Antal Kiss** paced himself sensibly, and was able to hold off the unheralded USA walker **Larry Young**, who scythed through the field in the last 20km. The podium times: 4:20:13, 4:30:17 and 4:31:55

50km Walk, Mexico City, 17 Oct 1968 (Competitors: 36; Countries: 19)

1.	Christoph Höhne	GDR	4:20:13.6
2.	Antal Kiss	HUN	4:30:17.0
3.	Larry Young	USA	4:31:55.4
4.	Peter Selzer	GDR	4:33:09.8
5.	Stig-Erik Lindberg	SWE	4:34:05.0
6.	Vittorio Visini	ITA	4:36:33.2
7.	Bryan Eley	GBR	4:37:32.2
8.	José Pedraza	MEX	4:37:51.4



Höhne wins in Mexico City in 1968

The 1972 Olympics, Munich

On September 5 1972, the Olympics finally lost the battle to dissociate itself from the pernicious influence of world politics on sport when Palestinian guerrillas invaded the Israeli team headquarters, taking hostages and killing two team members. In a clumsy attempt to rescue the hostages, 5 Arabs and 11 Israelis were killed. But for all that, the Games went on and the athletes contested their chosen events.

These Games saw East and West Germany win both walks. In fact, in the 20km event, it was only Golubnichiy who stopped an East German clean sweep of the medals. The East German sports machine had been born and was now bearing the first fruits of its ruthlessly scientific sports development program. This program would continue to produce champions up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990.

The winner in the 50km walk was expected to be one of defending champion **Christoph Höhne**, fellow East German **Peter Selzer** and Russian **Veniamin Soldatenko**. In the 1969 European Championships, Höhne had won and Soldatenko had taken third. In the 1970 Lugano Cup, Höhne won and Soldatenko improved to second. In the 1971 European Championships, Soldatenko won in 4:02:22 and Höhne was second. Then on September 20, 1971, in a USSR vs GDR 50km road walk, Soldatenko, with a world best of 3:59:17.8 narrowly beat Peter Selzer who recorded 3:59:21. The 4 hour barrier had finally been broken.

Yet the winner did not come from this elite trio. West German **Bernd Kannenberg**, a stocky 30 year old, had been, up till then, an aspiring 20km walker with a best international performance of 9th in the 1971 European championships. Inauspiciously, he had failed to finish in the just completed Olympic 20km event. Yet he led at every checkpoint in the Olympic 50km race and, by the 35km mark, only Kannenberg and Soldatenko were left. Soldatenko was slow in taking his refreshments at the 35km feeding station so Kannenberg decided to pick up the pace. Soldatenko, worried because he had already received a warning, was unable to respond. Both walkers easily beat Soldatenko's 'official' road world best time of 3:59:17 and Kannenberg became an instant German hero.

The win was not totally surprising as Kannenberg had been credited with a 3:52:45 road performance shortly before the Games. There had been general scepticism about the performance but his Olympic victory lends credence to it.

Larry Young repeated his bronze medal of Mexico City with the best time ever by an American. Kannenberg's winning time was the third-best ever, and Soldatenko's was the number five mark of all-time. The one major disappointment was Christoph Höhne. The defending champion had a rare off-day, finishing 14th in 4:20:44.

But was there more to Höhne's 14th place than meets the eye. It seems the answer is a resounding YES. The story goes that an anonymous phone call to the East German officials claimed that Höhne was going to defect during the 50km walk. Late on the night before the 50km, Höhne was disturbed by a knock on his door. It was the STASI and they methodically searched his room and interviewed him for an extended period of time. What chance he had of any sort of sleep was gone. His performance in the 50km was that of an exhausted man, both physically and psychologically.

The rumour mill was active. Had the phone call been a West German ploy? There was certainly no love lost between the diametrically opposed cousins and it did open the door for Kannenberg by taking out one of his main rivals. We will never know but it makes for interesting speculation.

50km Walk, Munich, 3 Sep 1972, (Competitors: 36; Countries: 18)

1.	Bernd Kannenberg	FRG	3:56:11.6
2.	Veniamin Soldatenko	URS	3:58:24.0
3.	Larry Young	USA	4:00:46.0
4.	Otto Bartsch	URS	4:01:35.4
5.	Peter Selzer	GDR	4:04:05.4
6.	Gerhard Weidner	FRG	4:06:26.0
7.	Vittorio Visini	ITA	4:08:31.4
8.	Gabriel Hernández	MEX	4:12:09.0



Bernd Kannenberg powers down the finishing straight to win the 1972 Olympic 50km – one of the most well known walking photos of all time.

Höhne was by no means finished. He bounced back in the 1973 Lugano Cup, held in Lugano in Switzerland. In a superb 50km race, he fought out the finish with Kannenberg and the Ukrainian Otto Bartsch who had been fourth in Munich. They were all well clear of Soldatenko in fourth place.

1973 Lugano Cup 50km, Lugano, 13 October 1973 (Competitors: 35)

1.	Bernd Kannenberg	FRG	3:56:51
2.	Otto Bartsch	URS	3:57:11
3.	Christoph Höhne	GDR	3:57:26
4.	Veniamin Soldatenko	URS	4:01:34
5.	Gerhard Weidner	FRG	4:01:59
6.	Peter Selzer	GDR	4:02:11
7.	Sergey Bondarenko	URS	4:07:52
8.	Winfried Skotnicki	GDR	4:08:30

He went two place better in the 1974 European Championship 50km in Rome, beating Bartsch to win the title, with Soldatenko back in 5th place and Kannenberg even further back in 9th place (Kannenberg had already come second to Golubnichiy in 20km earlier in the meet).

1974 European Championships 50km, Rome

1.	Christoph Höhne	GDR	3:59:05.6
2.	Otto Bartsch	URS	4:02:38.8
3.	Peter Selzer	GDR	4:04:28.4
4.	Vittorio Visini	ITA	4:05:43.6
5.	Veniamin Soldatenko	URS	4:09:31.6
6.	Winfried Skotnicki	GDR	4:10:19.0
7.	Gerhard Weidner	FRG	4:10:52.4
8.	Heinrich Schubert	FRG	4:16:05.0
9.	Bernhard Kannenberg	FRG	4:21:47.8
10.	Domenico Carpentieri	ITA	4:22:42.6



The big 4 in the 1974 European Cup 50km – Soldatenko, Kannenberg, Bartsch and Höhne

In a black segment of Olympic walking history, the 50km event was dropped from the 1976 Olympic Games, one of a number of events targeted in a move to reduce the size of what was seen as a bloated monster. What became of the main contenders?

- Bartsch dropped down to 20km, contesting that distance in the 1975 World Cup (4th in 1:27:35) and in the 1976 Olympics (13th in 1:312:12). Unfortunately he could not achieve the same heights in the 20km as in the 50km. With the 50km reinstated for the 1980 Olympics, he swapped back to that distance, coming 4th in the 1978 European Championships (3:57:23) and 15th in the 1979 World Cup (3:53:32). But although he was in career best form, he was now the 4th Russian behind a new younger faster breed of walker, all capable of breaking 3:50:00. He retired after his final 1979 50km race.
- Kannenberg also turned his back on the 50km event and geared his training towards the 20km event, establishing three world records and one world best track performance in quick succession in 1974. Firstly he set new marks for the 2 hours (27,137 mtrs.) and 30,000m (2:12:58.0) in Kassel on May 11. Then he set new marks for the 20,000m (1:24:45.0) and 1 hour (14,233 mtrs.) in Hamburg on May 25. Then in hot conditions in Rome, he was narrowly beaten by Golbunichiy in the European 20km Championship. In the 1975 Lugano Cup, he was again second in a major Championship 20km event in 1:26:20, this time behind Stadtmuller of East Germany. In November 1975, Kannenberg walked his last 50km event, a track race in Nerviana in Italy. There he set a World Record of 3:56:51.4. This was the first time 4 hours had been beaten on the track. Another first for the West German. He went into the 1976 Olympic 20km as a clear favourite but failed to finish. He did not race again in international competition.
- After his Olympic silver in 1972, Soldatenko had stepped back into his studies at Alma Ata and his results in the next couple of years had been modest. He recorded 4:01:33 in 1973 and 4:01:54 in 1974, the latter gaining him 8th place on the world list which was led by Holne with 3:52:52.8. But in 1975, he bounced back with a vengeance, winning again at the Spartakiad and leading the world list with 3:56:39. Come 1976 and 42 walkers turned up in Malmö for a special once-off IAAF 50km World Championship (to replace the lost Olympic race). It was Soldatenko who won in a personal best time of 3:54:40. None of the others from the big 4 competed.

With the IOC doing an about face and reinstating the 50km event in the 1980 Olympics, Soldatenko continued to compete internationally for a further two years after 1976, gaining 4th place in the 50km event in the 1977 Lugano Cup (4:08:20) and 2nd place in the 50km event at the 1978 European Championships (3:55:12) but then his name disappears from the results lists. His time had come and gone and the world standard continued to improve. The three Russians in the 1979 World Cup 50km event were all under 3:50 – Dorovski 3rd in 3:45:51, Fursov 5th in

3:46:55 and Melnik 6th in 3:49:31 – and even his old rival Bartsch was relegated to 15th place with his time of 3:53:32.

- Höhne was in career best form in 1974, winning the European Championship with 34:59:05 and leading the world list 3:52:52.8. But with the 50km now off the books internationally, he too retired.

The big 4 were now their thirties – Soldatenko born 1939, Höhne born 1941, Kannenberg born 1942 and Bartsch born 1943. Theoretically, they should now have been at their peaks with regard to the 50km. One can only guess at the mighty battle which would have ensued if the event had remained an Olympic event and they had faced the starter's gun shoulder to shoulder in Montreal in 1976.

This has been principally a story about Christoph Höhne. I finish with a couple of statistical sets.

First, his Yearly Bests in the 50km discipline show a steady improvement throughout his career, with his last few years his best ever in terms of times

1962:	4:28:14.6
1963:	4:10:46.8
1964:	4:12:49.2
1965:	4:03:14.0
1966:	4:17:55.6
1967:	4:02:43.4
1968:	4:06:23.4
1969:	4:05:19.0
1970:	4:04:35.2
1971:	3:59:09.5
1972:	3:57:44.4
1973:	3:57:25.2
1974:	3:52:52.8

Second, a review of the major races during his long international career reads just as impressively

1964	Olympic Games	Tokyo, Japan	6 th	50km
1965	World Cup	Pescara, Italy	1 st	50km
1967	World Cup	Bad Saarow, RDA	1 st	50km
1968	Olympic Games	Mexico City, Mexico	1 st	50km
1969	European Championship	Athens, Greece	1 st	50km
1970	World Cup	Eschborn, Germany	1 st	50km
1971	European Championship	Helsinki, Finland	2 nd	50km
1972	Olympic Games	Munich, Germany	14 th	50km
1973	World Cup	Lugano, Switzerland	3 rd	50km
1974	European Championship	Roma, Italy	1 st	50km

His 14th place in 1972 stands out as the one failure in an otherwise flawless career. Food for thought!

But Höhne's story does not finish there, as he attended a 1968 Olympic reunion of sorts in Perth, Australia, during the 2016 World Masters Championships, competing once again alongside Americans Goetz Klopfer (M70) and Tom Dooley (M70) and Australian Bob Gardiner (M80). For the record, Christoph won all 3 golds in the M75 division (5000m, 10km and 20km), showing the same determination and talent that marked his former career.



*Left: Höhne won 3 M75 golds in the 2016 World Masters Championships in Perth, Australia
Right: 1968 Olympians Christoph Höhne (GDR), Goetz Klopfer (USA), Tom Dooley (USA) and Bob Gardiner (AUS)*

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7 June 2017