

THE GREAT POST WAR WALKING CONTROVERSY

The post war period in Australia was a period of great controversy in walking circles but is mostly forgotten now. This brief article reviews what happened in those times of long ago.

All walking races in Australasia (Australia and New Zealand) had been judged throughout the first half of the twentieth century according to a rule passed at the 1900 Australasian Athletics Conference

1. *That a racing walker must have contact with the ground with one foot during a stride, and with both feet at the end of a stride.*
2. *That the heel of the front foot must touch the ground before the back foot leaves it.*
3. *That as the heel of the front foot touches the ground the leg must not be bent, its knee must be locked.*
4. *That the body and head must be kept upright.*¹

The IAAF rule was, by comparison, very vague.

Walking is progression by steps so taken that unbroken contact with the ground is maintained.

This did not mean that International walks were judged loosely. In fact, the straight knee was used unofficially overseas. But it gave room for ambiguity and the famous Melbourne coach Percy Cerutti was one to quickly see the implications. In 1947, he started to advocate a change to the local rules to remove the straight knee advice.

He then raised the issue of the IAAF walking rule formally at the A.A.U. meeting preceding the 1948 National Titles, to be held at St Kilda Cricket Ground. His argument was that since the rule only mentioned the need to maintain contact, then any mode of progression that obeyed the contact criteria was acceptable. The meeting decided that the international rule would be used for the 2 Mile Walk event at the Australian titles. This set the scene for a tumultuous few years.

In the National title race, Victorian George Knott bolted to the front, using what could only be described as a bent leg action. NSW walker Athol Stubbs gamely chased, using a more traditional straight leg technique. So close was Stubbs to Knott that one of Knott's shoes was dislodged and came off. Knott stopped, put the shoe back on, chased, caught and passed Stubbs while calls for his disqualification echoed from the crowd. Knott was not disqualified and became the new National champion.

The Victorian Track and Field titles were just as farcical with Knott winning the 1 Mile walk in an astonishing 6:23.2 and the 3 Mile walk in 21:32.6. Cerutti was talking up the idea of a 6 minute mile based on the 'new' walking technique which he called 'ambling'.

From February to May 1948, fantastic times were recorded and "world records" were broken frequently. However, the styles used became so ridiculous after a few months that VAWC brought in a local ruling on straightening the leg. Cerutti had his last 'walk' in the Queens Birthday Relay to Healesville and then returned to running where his style was more acceptable.

The following newspaper article notes an amazing 3 mile time done at Albert Park in early 1948 by a first year walker named Raymond Billings of Collingwood Harriers.

¹ *Racing Walking Practical Hints* by A. O. Barrett (Robertson and Mullens, Melbourne, 1947) p 3

First-Year Walker has Olympic Chance By Even Time

Revealing amazing pace for a first year walker, 20 year old R. Billings covered the three-mile course at Albert Park in the remarkable time of 20 min. 10 sec. on Saturday.

He bettered the world record for the distance.

Billings, who has proved a sensation in recent events by beating the Australian champion, Geo. Knott, competed on Saturday in the junior three-mile handicap.

He will race in the Victorian 10,000 metres championships at the Showgrounds on May 22, and, if he beats the world record for that distance, may make a last minute entry into the Australian team for the London Games.

Mr. Edgar Tanner, secretary of the Australian Olympic Federation, said last night that although the Australian team had been finalised, it was still possible, in exceptional circumstances, for world record holders to make the team.

The previous best time in Australia for the three miles was made by the Victorian barrister W. Murray in 1912 with 20 min. 56 sec.

G. E. Larner established the world time for the distance in 1905 with 20 min. 25 8-10 sec.

The president of the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club, Mr. A. Robinson, who has had many walkers through his hands, said that although Billings had yet to reach his best pace and is still a little green, he will improve rapidly as he better his style.

Mr. Robinson is certain that under ordinary weather conditions, Billings will break the world 10,000 metres record.

In the five miles senior open handicap, Geo. Knott (scr.) and H. Munro (1 min) both smashed the Victorian record of J. Mulcahy for the distance.

But these were not of course World or Australian or Victorian records as they were done on the roads of Albert Park. Further the races allowed a style of walking that would have been completely unacceptable overseas. The following blurry prints from that 'historic day' clearly show the styles used by the two main walkers



Billings in particular is doing what the British described as the 'bent knee crawl' and George Knott is also gaining what can only be called an unfair advantage by an obvious bent leg support phase.

Billings did walk in the Victorian 10,000m title mentioned in the article and finished second in 46:20, a wonderful time for a 20 year old. Winner George Knott broke the Australian record with his 42:51 and then duly went away to the 1948 Olympics. One can only speculate on the styles employed by Billings and Knott in this second race, given their finish times. (In fact, Knott's time broke the World Record but was never accepted at an I.A.A.F. level).

To Knott's credit, he was forced to review his technique once he reached Europe and he competed successfully in the Olympic 10,000m walk, coming 6th in his heat in around 47 minutes.

As an aside to complete the Billings story before moving on, he had no real successes after this initial flurry of publicity. He does not feature with any further Victorian medals, nor did he win any Australian medals. He is only listed in 3 further AV Track Walk champs – 1948 (14th), 1949 (8th in 16:11) and 1951 (14th) – and none of the results is anywhere near his 46:20 form of 1948.

He continued to walk in the early 1950s but with straighter legs and not as fast – he could not match his earlier times in races where a stricter judging standard was enforced.

When in May 1948, the Victorian Amateur Walking Club reversed its judging policy and returned to the straight leg rule, the situation improved on the local front, but the same could not be said for the rest of Australia. Each club had its own chief walking judge (Jack Larkins filled that role in Victoria) and each title race, whether State or National, was at the mercy of an ever changing interpretation of the rules.

The 1948 National title has been discussed above. The 1947 track titles also featured epic battles between Knott and Stubbs. Knott had held out Stubbs in the 1 Mile walk with subsequent cinematic film showing them both clearly off the ground. Then in the 3 Mile walk event, Stubbs had his revenge when Knott was disqualified for ‘walking on the white line’.

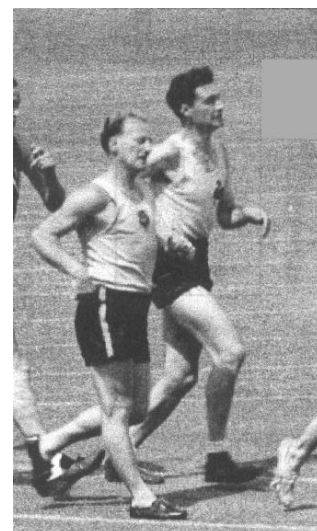
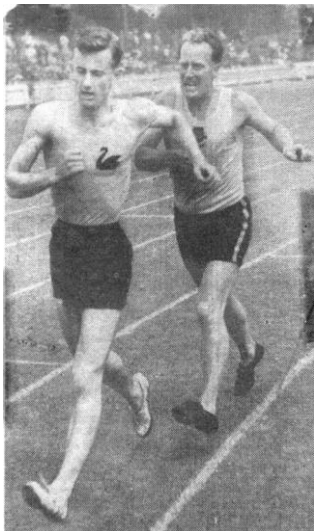
The 1949 National Titles in Sydney were also memorable but for the wrong reasons once again. The 2 Mile walk saw only 3 finishers, a severe judging standard by any measure. Yet even though nearly the whole field was disqualified, the winner, Stubbs once again, was heckled by the crowd with calls of ‘Stop running Athol’. I am sure that Stubbs, who was a superb competitor, took it all in his stride.

Tom Daintry had what was regarded as the best style in the business and this was the only occasion when he was ever disqualified. He commented years later

The only disappointment in my sporting life was the only time I was disqualified by an ex-rival when only one judge was required to disqualify. I represented Queensland in the Australian Championships in New South Wales. He had spread the word two weeks beforehand that I and Don Keane would be put out. Which he did in the first 50 metres.

The issue came to a head in 1950 when a proposal to abandon racewalks from the National Championships was put to the A.A.A.U. Conference. The proposal was lost but the 2 Mile walk in the National Championships in Adelaide a couple of days later put the issue into the media spotlight once again.

This particular 2 Mile walk championship was memorable for a number of reasons. This time, everyone got past the judges. It was a case of one extreme to the other. The two race leaders, 19 year old WA walker Don Keane and Stubbs of NSW, staged a mighty battle to break the Australian 2 Mile Walk record (both were awarded the same time of 13:43.6 with Keane being declared the winner) in what the media described as dubious circumstances. The photo of the finishing sprint (below left) does indicate that both walkers were pushing the absolute limit of what was acceptable. To quote from the accompanying newspaper report “*The photo, taken during the last lap, raised a doubt whether either had heel or toe on the ground.*”



But the real clincher occurred further back in the field where WA walker D Waters (known rather disparagingly as ‘running Waters’) finished in 4th place. The photo above right shows his technique midrace when walking alongside Stubbs. How did his technique satisfy even one judge much less a whole panel?

Yet in a sense this exciting race was a turning point. As one newspaper quoted

Critics of the heel-and-toe en, who have been trying to get this event eliminated from championships, must have gazed ruefully at the two-mile walk, which evoked tremendous enthusiasm as the title-holder, 40-year-old Sydney publican Athol Stubbs, walked stride by stride over the last lap with WA champion D. Keane. Both men put on a great burst of speed in the straight, with Kean gaining the decision by inches to create a new Australian record.

Walking had shown that it could be a crowd pleaser and that it did indeed have a future as a sport, even if it was a controversial one.

From then on, things seemed to improve. On the track front, Don Keane made the National Track title his own, winning it a record 7 times (1950-54, 1957-58) in the next 9 years. Luckily for Australian walking, his technique was rarely in doubt and his straight leg walking was an example to others of how to walk fast and within the rules. His 10th place in the 1952 Olympic 10,000m walk did a lot to raise the sullied profile of Australian walking.

For many walkers, however, the damage had already been done. During this postwar period, as walking lurched from one controversy to another, a number of walkers simply stopped competing. It did not seem to matter how well they walked. Sometimes they were beaten by others who either 'ran' or 'creeped'. At other times whole fields were devastated by over zealous judging that failed to discriminate between good and bad walkers.

It took a number of events to 'fix' walking in Australia

- a) a new IAAF racewalk judging rule that mandated a straight leg
- b) the gradual improvement in Australian judging standards and education
- c) affirmative action by the Australian walking clubs

And we sometimes complain about judging nowadays!

As an interesting aside, Percy Cerrutti's likes and dislikes of walking varied from year to year. As discussed above, his foray into walking in 1948 nearly ruined the sport. In 1952 after his return from Helsinki, he stated that race walking was finished as an International Sport. In 1956 when Don Keane and Ray Smith were regular visitors to Portsea, he was of the opinion that race walking was an excellent sport.

Then in the early 1960's, he changed his mind again and was quoted in "Sport" magazine (Sydney, Jan. 1963) to the effect that "race walking was 'suspect' by strong and virile men". After a series of correspondence 'debates' with well known Australian walking personalities in the magazine, he changed his mind yet again in early 1964 upon reading Frank McGuire's 'Training for Race Walking'. At the conclusion to a long article analysing the book, he succinctly extracted himself from his previous position with the following:

If there was one statement in the book I like above all others, it was the one attributed to Don Keane, possibly the best performed and over-all greatest of our walkers. Keane says this, "I believe walking should look like walking and I train that way". That's said the lot, since it is a condemnation of the hip-wobblers who bring an otherwise quite masculine and healthy sport into derision.

And that is all I've ever attacked after all. I have known too many good athletes who have achieved satisfaction and fame from walking to want to see their sport made a laughing stock by the absurdities we do see from so many. Not that running hasn't got its stupid techniques, tensions, etc, and its ignoramuses who set up as coaches. It has, too, and more's the pity.

I am all for the 'straight-thru' notion that Keane advocates, and Freeman and Smith (all Olympic Games competitors and Portsea influenced) – walk with. Learn to walk their way – get rid of your exaggerated hip-wobbles, more becoming in young ladies than young men, and you too may walk for Australia.

You had to admire Percy for the ease with which he could swap between absolutes and adopt a new position at the drop of a hat - and make it all sound so logical!

Tim Erickson, 31 July 2010