

## ERNIE AUSTEN, 1924 OLYMPIC WALKER



NSW athlete Ernie (Ernest E.) Austen was born in 1891, one of 14 children. He took up the sport of racewalking around 1910, initially as a track walker, and his first few years in the sport were unremarkable. With the Great War interrupting the careers of all young athletes, it was not until the re-establishment of organized sport in 1919 that he finally rose to prominence with a series of fine record breaking performances. Lightly built and with what was regarded as a perfect style, his mixture of speed, style and stamina marked him out in any field.

But as often happens, when a walker of note rises to the fore, another follows soon after. Thus it was with Austen for, as he rose to the top, a young giant called George Parker, some 10 years his junior, followed close behind and soon overtook him. Austen had to wait a number of years for his second opportunity at fame. Let the story unfold.

At the 1919 Metropolitan Championships at the Sydney Sports Grounds, Austen won both the 1 mile and the 3 mile walk events (with Parker second in both). Then at the St. Patrick's Day Carnival in Sydney in March 1920, Austen and Parker had a repeat battle over the 1 Mile distance with the older Austen winning in the fine time of 6:42. Victorian walker Ted Drayton thought that this performance put Austen some 40 yards better than anyone else in Australia over this distance.

Austen followed this up with a win in the NSW 7 Mile Walk championship, establishing new records for the four, six and seven mile distances. Two months later, he won the NSW One Hour Championship, breaking his own records for five, six and seven miles and establishing new ones for five miles and one hour.

Both Austen and Parker were selected as NSW representatives to compete in the 1920 Australian Amateur championships with Austen expected to dominate proceedings. However, Parker proved the surprise of the championships with wins in both walks. On the opening day, he won the 3 mile event in 22:45.4 and, on the final day, he demonstrated his marked superiority by winning the 1 mile in 6:49, his nearest opponent being 60 yards away.

Then taking part in a meeting at Pratten Park (Askfield) a few nights after the Australasian championships, Parker won a mile handicap from scratch in 6:33 which beat the NSW record. It was unfortunate for him that the required 3 stopwatches were not present.

These performances gained Parker Olympic selection for the Antwerp 1920 Games (where he secured the silver medal in the 3000m Walk). For Austen it must have been a great disappointment – what had seemed a certain Olympic berth was snatched from under him by his young challenger.

After the Olympics, Parker seemingly retired and Austen, with a succession of wins over various distances in the NSW championships of 1921 – 1923, was once again to the forefront of Australian walking

With interest in walking becoming stronger, the Victorian and New South Wales walking clubs decided that an interstate road race should be held. After 2 years of discussions, the date and distance and status were finally decided. In July 1923, the first Australasian 7 Mile Championship was held in Melbourne (this event became a

bi-annual Championship with teams competing for the Glover Shield). Austen led from the gun and won easily in the fine time of 55:44.4 over what was described as a heavy wet track. ew

In 1924, Austen's great form continued. In February he easily won the Australian Track championship walks in Hobart – the One Mile in 6:45 and the Three Mile in 22:33. A correspondent commented that "*his wins reminded one of W. Murray in his prime*". Then in March, he won the NSW track walks in similar style. He was now the unchallenged champion on both road and track.



**Ernie Austen displays perfect walking style, Sydney, 1922**

Finally the veteran walker's efforts were rewarded with Olympic selection and Austen, now in his thirties, proudly made the trip to Paris for the 10,000m track walk.

Amazingly and controversially, he was warned in the first lap by the French judge who thought his gait doubtful. In the second lap the American judge ordered him off when he was lying third and was doing well. In later years, he commented

*"I was in third place, just behind the leaders and going along very easily. I thought I had a good chance but then an American judge came up and told me I was disqualified. I asked him why but he said he didn't know. You usually get two cautions before being disqualified but I wasn't aware of them. Nobody ever did tell me why I was outed."*



**Ernie Austin, in the middle, before being disqualified in the 1924 Olympic 10,000m walk**

He broke down and went to the dressing rooms. It was his first disqualification in some 15 years of competitive walking. The pace at the time of his disqualification was very slow – equal to about 7:30 to the mile. In fact, of the 13 starters, only 6 finished in what was a farcical event. Australian officials were adamant that his style was satisfactory and the whole event deteriorated into an ugly affair. (Walking was consequently dropped from the 1928 Olympics and did not re-appear in the Olympics until 1932, when a 50 km roadwalk was introduced.)

Returning home, he announced his retirement from the sport and was not seen for some years. While George Parker, in a return to the sport, rampaged and took all before him, Austen was nowhere to be seen. It was not until 1927, when Parker's star was fading, that Austen once again faced the starter's gun. He was soon back to his best with a win in the 1927 Australasian 1 Mile walk in 6:52 and a second to New Zealand champion W. Lankey in the Australasian 3 Mile walk.

The 1928 NSW Track titles saw Austen win both the 1 Mile walk (6:48.8) and the 3 Mile walk (22:53.8). The commentary read as follows

*Parker finds it increasingly difficult to reduce weight and he looked decidedly on the big side, whilst Austen appeared well attuned for the fray.*

Austen continued, like Parker, to race on the local Sydney scene for a further few years but his days at the top were over. The last press cutting I have found was dated January 10 1930 from the Sydney Mail (page 31) and concerns the NSW Track and Field Titles. It reads, with the typical anti-walking bias of the time

*The 1924 Olympian E. Austen (Western Suburbs) defended his title in the three miles walk, which went to A. Stubbs, of Eastern Suburbs. While at some time or other every competitor transgressed the rule of walking, W. Clark (Randwick-Kensington), who finished second, was the only one to be disqualified. The winner's time was 22 min 40s.*

He finally retired in 1932, after more than 20 years of competitive walking. Still an active sportsman, he took up golf with immediate success.

*"I won my first trophy at Kyogle, up north, and the next week I won it again. They thought I was a horrible burglar, coming up for their trophies. The prize was a man's Stetson hat but I didn't wear hats so I gave it back and they thought I was a good bloke again." <sup>1</sup>*

Despite representing Australia at Olympic level and holding various Australasian walk titles and record times, he regarded his proudest achievement as in the field of golf when, at 81 years of age, he played a round in less than his age, 80 off the stick. (Interestingly, 1912 Olympic walker Bill Murray was also able to lay claim to this feat, achieved by very few golfers).

Like A. O. Barrett in Victoria, Ernie was also a prominent bush walker and is mentioned on more than one occasion in the book *Jock Marshall: One Armed Warrior*, the story of the extraordinary Australian scientist and naturalist. The following section discusses a field trip in the Lamington in 1933 <sup>2</sup>

In the course of so much collecting and observing in the bush Jock often met up with members of bush-walking clubs. One of these was Ernest Austen who had represented Australia in the walk in the Olympic Games held in 1924. 'Jock was quite unimpressed with my prowess' said Austen. 'He was organising a collecting trip by himself into the McPherson Ranges and refused my suggestion to join forces - said he was a "loner". Mind you, he came around later.' After another bush experience, Jock discovered the Olympic walker had more than speed; the nuggety, humorous man was extremely resourceful in a tight corner and cunning with things like green (i.e. raw) leather. Ernie Austen generously ignored his arrogance and they arranged to meet at a camp under the ranges on the Tweed River in October 1933.

The New South Wales-Queensland border runs along the edge of the Lamington Plateau at the point where Jock and Ernie chose to climb into the ranges. From the border track there is an almost sheer drop into New South Wales, down to Hopping Dick Creek and the beautiful valley of the Tweed. This was the country of the hoop and bunya pine, and the red cedar, the rich dark wood which furnished thousands of 19th Century Australian drawing rooms. These magnificent timbers, especially the giant red cedars, have been sliced away from the sides of the valley - shorn green and smooth with only the occasional tracery of a bunya pine or a sapling cedar to show where they had been. But there is still big timber in the inaccessible ranges, and Lamington Plateau is topped by thick rain forest where huge moss-draped Antarctic beeches - quite different from the deciduous English beech - and twisting vines shadow the sun.

Jock wanted to study the birds of the rain forest. He also had relatives at a farm at the foot of the ranges, and this was one reason for choosing an extremely difficult route into the forest. The other was that he and Austen found the challenge of that soaring cliff-face irresistible. Their camp under the plateau at the edge of the forest was drenched. It rained 'like the devil, and I noted *artemus* clinging to a Silky Oak trunk, apparently to escape the wet. Remember Tambo track - Central West - when another specimen clung to poles to escape the sun.' He kept his notes in all conditions; often putting up with extraordinary physical discomfort while observing animals.

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1 <http://www.trump.net.au/~austen/ernie.htm>

2 *Jock Marshall: One Armed Warrior* is the story of the extraordinary Australian scientist. This biography was written by Jock's wife, Jane Marshall, and is found in the Melbourne University website at [http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/bsparcs/exhib/marshall/m\\_ch2.htm](http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/bsparcs/exhib/marshall/m_ch2.htm)

In spite of the rain, on the steep face there was hardly a drop of water. It was a hard climb with heavy packs and he admitted 'Austen and I were tired - more so than we'd ever been.' After a month collecting and observing in the mountains and the Tweed Valley, he returned to Brisbane, then went north to the islands of the Barrier Reef with an Embury expedition. These were primitive tourist excursions sailing to islands then virtually untrampled by people, and naturalists were paid to inform and guide the clientele.

He died in 1985 in his mid nineties. Like so many of the old walkers from his era, he lived to a ripe old age and had a full and varied life.

Ernie Austen's place in Australian racewalking history is assured. As one of our first Olympic walkers, he paved the way for future generations to try their mettle against the top echelon of international walkers. He, along with Bill Murray and George Parker, showed that Australian walkers were able to mix it with the best in the world. Since then, Australia has gone on to have a proud history of Olympic racewalking participation.