

## ALBERT JOHNSON – OLYMPIC WALKER AGAINST ALL THE ODDS

When Albert Johnson was born in Sheffield, Yorkshire, on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1931, one of seven children (2 brothers and 4 sisters) and one of twin boys, no one ever dreamed that he would go on to become a dual Olympic walker. Born with a deformed foot, he was told that he would never be able to walk without the aid of leg calipers and he was aged six and starting school when he started to use them.

When the Second World War came in 1939, Albert and his family were forced to evacuate from Sheffield and he spent 4 years in Leicester. This was obviously a difficult time for a young boy as he only saw his parents twice during this entire period. By the time it was safe to return to his home in 1944, his health had deteriorated as he had contracted a debilitating hip infection in the early part of his compulsory sojourn. His family were advised that he might die at a very early age and their concern was great indeed.

At the age of sixteen, he was given the chance of a normal life by going through a series of operations, enabling him to gain complete mobility in his hips and legs, something he later regarded as 'a gift from God'. At the age of seventeen, he commenced work as a manual labourer and, despite his ordeal with the surgery a year before, his hip and foot did not cause him any further trouble.

Soon after this, whilst working as a silversmith, he overheard a conversation between two employees about a local 12 mile race walk for novices called the 'Star Walk.' That afternoon he and a mate Doug Wainwright decided to enter the walk that they had heard so much about, even although they had no experience or knowledge of race walking. They were laughed at and ridiculed by many people who said they would be lucky to make it to half way but they persevered, finishing the race in last position together. A great feat!

Following his introduction to walking, Albert joined the Sheffield United Harriers and began to train. He approached a coach for specialised training but was rejected because he was told he would never make it because of his deformed foot. After much searching, he found a training partner and a coach who was willing to take him on. His coach, Mr. Woodward, would ride behind him when he was walking on the road, keeping him motivated and protecting him from vehicles.

In 1949, aged 18, Albert again competed in the Star Walk. The two years of hard work and dedication had paid off as he finished in a credible third place. The secret of his success was simple - strolling for three to four hours nearly every day to strengthen his legs - he would catch a bus to work in the morning then walk back home in the evening. This training program of long strolls was interspersed with weights, fartleks, and speed work – quite sophisticated for that era.

At the age of nineteen he enlisted in the British Army but his career was short lived – as soon as army officials found out about his foot deformity, he was discharged. This spurred him on and he trained even harder, to be rewarded with selection in the county team to contest the National 10 Mile Junior walk championship. Racing against strong competition in Manchester, he finished fourth. He was now tasting some success after years of disappointment and walking was fast becoming his main activity in life.

Albert would train every Wednesday at his local club where there would be around one hundred walkers of all ages doing laps of the track. He enjoyed this tremendously as the walkers treated everyone as equals, something that he had not often experienced. His Wednesday training session – some 20 miles of continuous walking, from 5PM until 8PM. During the rest of the week he would train on different road courses surrounding Sheffield.

He worked at many different occupations throughout his life - cutlery maker, security guard, sales assistant, labourer and nurse – but his walking was a constant.

In 1954, aged 22, he dipped his toe into senior competition, finishing second in The Leicester Mercury 20 Mile Walk classic. With this under his belt, he targeted the Bradford walk, a gruelling race of nearly 30 miles. Leaving the more highly credentialled favourites behind, he had a 3 minute lead by the half way point and was well under the race record. Although fading in the latter stages, his lead was too big to bridge and he won in 4:36:36, the youngest winner for many years. After news of his win filtered through the town, he had his name plastered all over every local newspaper and had finally made 'the big time'. Not long after his Bradford triumph he produced another stellar performance to win the Outer Circle Walk.

His next serious outing came in the UK 50km championship, held in his hometown of Sheffield. Although he finished the race in second place behind the 1948 Olympic champion John Ljunggren (after surrendering a thirty second lead to remove a stone from his shoe) he was the first British walker home and was rewarded with the gold medal. This was not his only reward – he was now chosen for the UK team to compete at the 1954 European Championship to be held in Zurich, Switzerland. He was given big raps by the local media and talked up as a possible medal chance. Alas, on the

morning of his race, the weather was scorching and, in the trying conditions, he became so dehydrated that he was forced to retire from the race. This was a new feeling. He had never retired from a race before and he was bitterly disappointed.



**Albert wins his first National 50km in 1954**

Despite his failure in Zurich, he continued training and in 1955 he won almost every walking race he contested. He continued his good form into 1956, winning the Leicester, Bradford, Hillsborough, Outer Circle and UK Championships easily and looked set for Olympic selection along with fellow walkers Don Thompson and Derek Hall.

The good news came in August when his Olympic selection was confirmed and he was soon off to Australia with the British team, flying from London to Melbourne with stops at Calcutta and Singapore.

Arriving on Australian soil, the British team were hit with the heat of the Australian summer, a rude awakening for them coming from a cold English autumn. He roomed with Don Thompson in the Olympic village and trained with him and Roland Harding.

Onto the 50km race day – after eating two pieces of toast covered in honey and a glass of fruit juice for breakfast, he prepared his race drinks, which consisted of a teaspoon of sugar in cold water, packed his bag and set off to the M.C.G. with Harding.



**The 1956 Olympic 50km – Albert in Dandenong Road**

The twenty athletes from eleven nations assembled at the start line in the huge arena that was the Melbourne Cricket Ground. From there the course wound its way out to Springale before a return to finish at the track. He left the stadium in around eighth place, nicely tucked in the leading pack. His race plan was to set out conservatively because of the heat and to gradually pick up the pace during the race, but he never got into his rhythm and always felt awkward, struggling in the oppressive conditions (this was the hottest day of the Games). By the half way point he was in eleventh position, some twenty minutes behind the leaders. Towards the end of the gruelling race he made up some ground on his

opponents, finishing strongly in 8<sup>th</sup> position in a time of 5:02:19, over 30 minutes outside his best. But it was still the ultimate buzz and a memory he cherished for this whole life. *“It was a great experience, something I’ll never forget, walking into the M.C.G with 80,000 people cheering.”*

After a month's break, he began training again, looking towards the 1960 Rome Olympics. From 1957 to 1959, he maintained his form and, when selected for his second Olympics, he felt he was in the best form of his life and capable to attacking the 4 hour barrier.

Come Rome, he got off to a great start, blitzing the field out of the stadium and onto the road. He was ahead and felt great. However, his confidence was soon dented as he soon heard he was on two reports. A few kilometres later the unthinkable happened – a third report and he was disqualified. He was shattered. The British team officials protested, maintaining that his form was correct and that the reports were biased, one at least being given by a judge who was the coach of one of the other main contenders. Alas, like all such protests, it was dismissed. As an interesting aside, Australian walkers Noel Freeman and Ron Crawford were also disqualified soon after taking the lead after Albert's dismissal.



**Albert in his prime as a racewalker**

Back home, he continued to race, competing in a large variety of events year by year, including his favourites – the Leicester Mercury walk, the Bradford Whit Walk and Isle of Man Parish Walk. He also started to coach and soon caught the eye of the Isle of Man authorities and he was duly invited to represent them in the inaugural 1966 Commonwealth Games as an athlete and a coach. In his last international event, in the heat of Jamaica, he finished the 20 mile walk event in 8<sup>th</sup> place with 3:08:06.

In 1967 he moved to the Isle of Man where he was offered a coaching job and in 1969, he married Mildred, a local Manx girl. While there, he coached a number of prominent walkers including John Warhurst and Roy Thorpe who took gold and silver in the 1972 Christchurch Commonwealth Games. He didn't walk as much now but still trained with his athletes when possible.

In 1971, he moved back to Sheffield with Mildred and they started their family, eventually having 3 children Catherine, Denise and Adrian. In May 1974 he and Mildred decided to move to Australia and start a new life with their young family. Their destination was Tasmania and they settled in New Norfolk where he worked as a qualified nurse at the hospital.

He had no intention in resuming his coaching career but was persuaded otherwise and over the years, he has coached a whole swag of top Tasmanian athletes, including

- Russell Foley – winner of the 1990 Melbourne Marathon
- Dean Giblin and Michael Dalton – competitive long distance runners in the 1990s
- Mandy Giblin – 1998 Commonwealth Games and World Cross Country representative
- Kylie Risk – Olympic Comm Games and World Cross Country representative
- Ricky Cooke – 1991 Racewalking World Cup representative – Open 50km walk
- Greg Robertson – 1988 World Junior Championships representative – 10,000m walk
- Daniel Coleman – 2008 Racewalking World Cup representative – Junior 10km

Unfortunately due to ill health, Albert was forced to retire from coaching in 2004, leaving a great hole in the Australian coaching scene but leaving his mark in the history of athletics. He died on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 2011, aged 80.

A final word to Daniel Coleman, one of his many successful athletes:

*Albert was a man of high integrity, a man of passion and a man with high expectations. He never missed any of his athletes' training sessions. Even if it was pouring with rain, he would be at the athletics track telling us to go home or telling stories about when he was an athlete to get us motivated to train.*

*Albert was known on the athletics scene as the man in the akubra hat and blazer – he wore them to every training session and every competition.*

Tim Erickson  
24 May 2011

With thanks to Daniel Coleman for this biographical information and for the great photos.

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The following fine eulogy was written by Robbie Lambie and published on the Isle of Man Athletics website. <http://www.manxathletics.com/>

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I recall my first race walk which was a one mile event (under 15's) around the perimeter of the NSC. I got disqualified after about three quarters of a mile when leading and the person who 'pulled' me out of the race was none other than Albert Johnson. As disappointed and hurt as I was, I knew that Albert had done it for my own good and to his credit had handled the situation very sensitively and professionally and just encouraged me to move on and not dwell on that race. I respected him for that. Although I don't think Albert was ever a judge, he could quite easily have been one and would have been as good a judge as anyone as he could spot technical flaws in a walker's technique like no other person and more importantly knew how to remedy it.

I had been a sprinter, middle distance runner (and footballer) prior to meeting Albert but he had influenced me and had sold walking to me so it seemed reasonable to give it a go. All he said about training and coaching just made sense. So he started to coach me. I lived at St Johns at the time and Albert would either ride his motorbike out to my house, catch a bus or on several occasions run the 8 miles from Douglas, do an hour session with myself, Brian Leece, Ray Pitts, David Pitts and several others, towel down and then run back home. Remarkable that, which proved how committed and dedicated he was to his athletes. For a bit of variety, occasionally he would train Stuart Comaish, John Reynolds and myself at Foxdale, just so we could train on the hills. Sometimes he would arrange to meet an athlete somewhere and if it was raining he still turned up for the session whether the athlete did or not. His attitude was 'I must lead by example and if I don't show up, then what message is that sending out to the athlete, especially if they turn up?'

In 1967 he broke the Parish Record when he recorded 15 hrs 54 mins after going off course at Bride. It was around that time (or possibly the year before) that he was leading in the End to End walk and collapsed at the Shore Hotel with just over 3 miles to go. He had been walking all over the road for several miles prior to his final collapse. Clearly embarrassed about his 'Jim Peters' type marathon performance, he emphasised to his training group afterwards, that you must never start off too hard in an endurance event particularly if you hadn't put the training in. It was an object lesson to all of us and he had paid the price for teaching us that.

Around 1972 Albert left the Island to move back to Sheffield. He got married to Mildred and soon started a family. He moved to Parsons Cross which was quite close to Hillsborough. He trained a squad of walkers who trained around the football ground in a road circuit which was probably about 1.5 miles. It was during this period after staying with Albert and Mildred (and their 2 young girls) that I got to know some of the Sheffield and Yorkshire walkers like Jake Warhurst, Mike Holmes, Peter Ryan to name a few. Albert had now become the National Coach in Race Walking. Walkers were already reaping the rewards of his coaching skills as some of his training group i.e. Jake Warhurst, Roy Thorpe and Graham Young had all excelled in the 1974 Commonwealth Games held at Christchurch, New Zealand. Jake won the gold, Roy the silver and Graham finished in 4th place in the 20 mile event. I believe Jake had finished 4th place in the European 20 kilometre Champs just prior to the Commonwealths.

Several years later Albert decided to emigrate and he and his family moved to Tasmania to take on a new life. Albert always liked the Australians and the way they spoke freely about things. I think the seeds were sown when he went to Melbourne at the 1956 Olympics. He soon got into the coaching after finding employment in psychiatric nursing. After doing some coaching in walking he drifted into coaching running with success.

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Few of us heard of him from him on the Island for about 15 years or more until one evening down the NSC in 1997 I spotted a couple walking round the NSC track. The man was wearing a fedora and I thought 'I know that man'. It was Albert Johnson who had brought along Mildred to watch a local track meet. It was such a shock to meet the great man as it nobody had known he was coming to the IOM. They had both come over to the Island for 3 weeks to look up old friends, probably realising it was really their last chance to see Manx friends.

After talking to him for a while I was pleasantly surprised and impressed to hear that he had taken on coaching jobs in sprinting in Australia. He had moved on and had kept up with the modern methods of athletics and was making a name for himself 'down under'. I think Albert's frankness and honesty went down well with the Aussies as clearly they respected his achievements and training methods. In fact I have read some touching testimonials by some of the Australian athletes and officials regarding Albert and it is clear that he was very popular and well respected. In reality he had carried on his success helping athletes in Australia to win National titles.

It must have been a sight to behold for him when he walked round the track at the NSC those 14 years ago before watching the Steve Jacobs mile handicap race. All his hard work in the campaign, along with people like Arthur Currie, Peter McElroy, Denis Lace and Brian Whitehead to get an all weather track in the IOM had eventually come to fruition. A bit late for some of us but I know that the above personnel tried desperately to get a track laid way back in the 1960's.

Albert returned to Tasmania with Mildred probably a little sad but I am sure that Albert in particular will have been proud with what he saw with all the juniors running and walking still active in the local scene. He had left Manx athletics in good and safe hands. This is mainly down to the efforts of people like Di Shimell and Allan Callow who have coached junior athletes over the years with great success, winning titles and helping athletes to gain Commonwealth Games selection and in some cases internationals. On the walking front, Allan Callow in particular deserves great credit as he became National Walking Coach (after Julian Hopkins and Peter Markham) and has given so much time to devote to these athletes and I am sure Steve Partington, Steve Taylor, Mike Karran to mention a few of many who have prospered under his encouragement, experience and knowledge. Though I am sure Allan would in his typical unassuming and modest way just say – don't thank me, thank Albert Johnson. It was down to him that I got interested in walking in the first place, he taught me all I know.

Local walking owes a lot to Albert Johnson and with walkers who were coached, influenced and guided by him such as Graham Young, John Cannell and Allan Callow, has produced a 'knock on' effect' with younger walkers and the whole local scene has snowballed. Where else can you see in Great Britain and possibly the world fields of nearly 1800 walkers lining up to do an 85 mile walk? Not to mention attracting top athletes and celebrities over to either compete or give motivational and inspirational talks, such as Roger Black and Steve Backley. These situations have to start from somewhere and I would suggest the seeds were sown nearly 50 years ago, partly down to a Yorkshireman coming over to the Island and spreading the word. Indeed an ex Olympian who couldn't even pass a medical when he was 18 years of age.

I think Albert Johnson must be right up there with the best athletic coaches that we've seen which includes the likes of George Gandy and Harry Wilson who have also passed away. He was definitely in the Premier League. It's just a shame we will not see his like again but he has left a legacy and he has certainly made his mark in a powerful and positive way. We all him owe so much.

Sympathy and condolences are expressed to Albert's family and close friends and especially to his wife Mildred, a lovely lady born in the Isle of Man, who in Albert's words 'had to put up with a lot' but rarely complained.

Rest in Peace Albert.

Robbie Lambie