

ALBERT ROWLAND 1885 – 1918: NEW ZEALAND OLYMPIC WALKER

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With the 100th anniversary of the Gallipoli landings commemorated this Anzac week (25th April 2015), we focus on another New Zealand serviceman of World War I, the pioneering New Zealand Olympic race walker Albert Rowland.

As New Zealand's first ever Olympic medallist, Harry Kerr is quite rightly remembered for his feat. He returned home after the London Olympics a conquering hero, enjoyed an incredible flourish at the age of 46 and was later inducted into the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame in 1996.

Much less, however, is known about Albert Rowland – the man who finished two places behind Kerr for fifth in the 3500m Race Walk at those 1908 Games.

Albert Edward Mackay Rowland was born in Christchurch on October 26, 1885. An optician by trade he had shown good form leading into London Games snaring both the New Zealand one mile and three miles race walk titles in 1907 to qualify for the Olympics.

The race walking pair - alongside Henry St Aubyn Murray (110m hurdles) - made history as the first three New Zealanders to compete at an Olympics Games (note, Fijian-born New Zealander Victor Lindberg represented Great Britain in water polo at the 1900 Olympics), although they did so under the banner of a combined 32-strong Australasian team. A trend which would continue until the 1920 Antwerp Games when New Zealanders would finally compete as an independent nation.

The Games had been originally awarded to Rome, but after Italy was plunged into financial crisis following the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1906 the fourth modern Olympic Games was re-located to London.

The event - which attracted athletes from 22 nations – was bizarre by contemporary standards. Competition officially started on April 27 and did not end until October 31 – making the Games the longest in the modern era. Alongside the traditional Olympic sports we know today were motor boating, polo and tug-of-war.

Held in the magnificent 68,000 capacity White City Stadium the athletics provided the pinnacle of competition on a track which measured 536m or three laps to the mile. The Games were perhaps best remembered for the marathon – a race in which Italian Dorando Pietri collapsed several times and ran the wrong way in the final stages of the race. Several people came to his aid and he crossed the finish line first only for second place finisher American Johnny Hayes to successfully protest and be awarded the gold medal.

First up for Kerr and Rowland was the men's 3500m track walk – the heats and final of which both took place on Tuesday July 14. Drawn in the first of the three heats, Kerr comfortably secured second to advance to the final in 16:02.02 behind George Larnar of Great Britain. In heat three, Rowland qualified into the medal race by virtue of securing the third and final qualification place from his heat by just 1.4secs from Great Britain's Ernest Larnar.

In the final Kerr almost missed the start as he was talking to officials under the grandstand as the race was about to begin.

The British duo of Ernest Webb, Ralph Harrison and Canadian George Goulding took the early pace. Shortly after,

eventual gold medallist George Larnier passed Harrison, who was later disqualified, with Kerr edging Goulding to take the bronze in 15:43.4 by 6.4 seconds. Rowland placed a solid fifth in 16:07.0.



The start of the 1908 Olympic 3000m – Harry Kerr is third from right and Albert Rowland is on the right

The pair returned for the heats of the ten-mile track walk two days later but Rowland missed out on a place in the final by one spot, finishing fifth in his heat behind a quartet of British athletes in 1:21:57.6. Kerr advanced, finishing third in his heat but did not start in the final, which took place the following day.

The imposing 6ft 4ins Kerr returned to New Zealand a national hero and secured the three-mile race at the national champs in Wellington in 21:36.6 – a national record until 1946. He ‘retired’ in 1912 before later serving Europe during World War I.

Rowland stayed in Europe much longer after the Olympics, representing Herne Hill Harrier Club in South London before returning to New Zealand to establish the Wellington Scottish Athletic Club in 1915.

Yet while Kerr was to fortunately survive the ravages of World War I, Rowland was not so lucky.

Second Lieutenant serving the New Zealand Rifle Brigade and the New Zealand Cycling Battalion, he was to perish at Marne River on July 23, 1918 – a little over a decade after competing at the London Olympics.

The final year of World War 1 had begun with a series of German victories as the Allies became increasingly splintered. Yet in March the Allied forces fought back repelling a series of German attacks and stabilising the front around Mailly-Maillet. Some 500 New Zealanders died in the battle.

By July of that year the Germans were seriously depleted but launched what was known as their last major spring offensive of the First World War. An Allied counterattack by French and US forces then pushed the Germans back during the Second Battle of the Marne. New Zealand mounted troops of XXII Corps and Rowland’s New Zealand Cyclist Battalion captured the village of Marfaux on July 22. The following day Rowland perished. He was aged 32. He left a wife, Agnes Ludlow Rowland.

By August 6, the Germans had been defeated in the battle for what proved a morale-boosting victory for the Allies. Within three months Germany was brought to its knees and was finally over. However, the toll had been immense and the Great War had claimed the lives of 18,000 New Zealanders.

Kerr survived his war efforts and remarkably returned to race walking action to land the 1925 New Zealand three-mile race walk title at the age of 46. Returning to fitness by training on an old railway track and by clearing a circular track around his family farm he remarkably won the title in Wanganui in a feat described by The New Zealand Herald as “little short of marvellous.”

A champion shooter and enthusiastic rugby player he later represented Taranaki at lawn bowls before he died of cancer in his native Taranaki in 1951 aged 72.

But that is not quite the end of the Kerr-Rowland story. Since 2008 the Harry Kerr Centennial Trophy – a 5x10000m race walking relay which doubles as the Race Walking New Zealand Track Relay Championship - has taken place. The Kerr-Rowland 3500m Track Walk – the distance they competed over at those 1908 London Games – which is open to all race walkers is also part of the same festival of race walking.

This year's event takes place at Mt Smart Stadium, Auckland on Sunday July 19 ensuring that the pair's remarkable legacy and contribution to New Zealand athletics lives on.