

AUGIE HIRT AND THE 1976 AMERICAN CENTURION WALK

Augie Hirt became the youngest member of the USA Centurion Club when he won the 1976 National 100-mile championship in 19:55:16 but there is much more to his story than that one feat. From 1973 through 1979, Augie was named to 13 USA national teams and won seven national racewalking championships at distances from 30km to 100km.

But let's start the story with his centurion qualification in 1976. This particular event was recognized by a feature story in Sports Illustrated and it is still to be read in their archives at <http://www.si.com/vault/1976/10/18/626652/long-days-journey-into-night>. Here is how it goes

Long day's journey into night
SUN UP AND SUN DOWN, THE 100-MILE CHAMPIONSHIP WALK WAS AGONIZING
By Anita Verschoth
Sports Illustrated, Oct. 18, 1976

Around noon, with the race still an hour away, the walkers began to arrive at the red crushed-shale track of Hickman High School in Columbia, Mo. They carried blankets and extra clothing: sweatsuits, hats, shoes. Some brought oilskin ponchos because rain had been forecast. Before getting into their socks and track shoes, sneakers or Hush Puppies, they rubbed Vaseline between their toes to prevent chafing and put moleskin on areas likely to get sore or blistered. Some taped the gap between shoe rim and sock or slipped on spats cut from old stockings to keep the small sharp shale pebbles out of their shoes.

Wives and children, the only spectators on hand, set up a couple of tents and a table to serve as a feeding station. They produced sandwiches, honey, coffee, unfizzed Coke and special energy drinks like BP (not a fuel, but Body Punch) and E.R.G. (Electrolyte Replacement Glucose, a "Gookinaid"). Six judges sat down under a canopy, ready to record and announce everybody's quarter-mile splits.

There were only 30 walkers at the start on that last Saturday in September (as compared to 2,180 runners in this year's Boston Marathon), and only a few of them could realistically expect to finish the race, for this was no weekend stroll. The distance was 100 miles, a staggering 400 laps around the track, to be completed within 24 hours. The contestants would have to walk at least at a 14-minutes-per-mile pace, which would allow 40 minutes for "pit stops" in the restrooms at the top of the stands, clothing changes in the cold of the night and perhaps a brief nap in a tent.

This was the 10th National 100-Mile Walking Championship, which is billed as the toughest track event in the U.S. Race Director Joe Duncan calls it "the ultimate madness." Columbia was a fitting site. Besides being the home of the giant killer football team of the University of Missouri, it is a sanctuary for some 20 serious race walkers. Larry Young, twice an Olympic medal winner, lives there; so does Augie Hirt, who ranks second to Young in the 50 kilometers and works as an accountant for a CPA. Hirt returned from the 50 km. World Championship in Sweden, where he finished 27th, just in time to enter this year's 100.

It was another Columbia resident, Bill Clark, who conceived the 100-mile championship in 1966. He had been inspired by the Centurion Club of Great Britain and its 100-mile walks that had been going on since the turn of the century and by the feats of three American amateur walkers who in 1878 completed a 100-miler within 24 hours on an indoor track in New York - the country's first centurions. But when Clark sent out invitations in 1966, nobody came.

In the fall of 1967, however, five competitors did show up, and off they went. After 64½ miles, 60-year-old Larry O'Neil was the only survivor and on his way to what still stands as the record - 19:24:34 - churning along at an incredible 11:40 pace. Only Larry Young has gone faster, but his record of 18:07:12 was set indoors in 1971 when the Hickman track was flooded by rain.

O'Neil, now 69, revered as the dean of the event, was back for his ninth try after having completed four of the previous eight. A trim, bright-eyed man, he trains eight miles a day in the mountains near his lumber business in Kalispell, Mont., wearing shorts whether it shines or snows. He will don a sweatsuit only when the temperature drops below zero. "I was very happy when I finished my first race," he said, "even though my feet were covered with a bloody scab from the crushed shale on the track and all my toenails had fallen off."

John Argo, a little 62-year-old timber feller from Mattawa, Ontario, a town of 2,600, was also back. He had entered the

Columbia walk in 1970 and 1973 and the British one in 1971 and finished all three. He is also renowned for having paddled Canada's three-day, 122-mile canoe race from Ville Marie to North Bay six times and for winning the snowshoe competition at the North Bay Winter Carnival nine years in a row. In 1970 he traveled 43 miles on snowshoes to the Winter Carnival because its organizers, who viewed him as a special attraction, had promised to pay his way to the Columbia walk if he made it.

The pre-race favorite was Chuck Hunter, the defending champion, a 39-year-old air traffic controller from Longmont, Colo. He had entered three previous races and gone the distance each time. Built like a football player, he is often asked whether his size—6', 180 pounds—is not a handicap. "It's just like a Clydesdale horse against a quarter horse," he likes to answer. "You get more work out of the former, but in shorter distances it is an advantage to be the latter." The work Hunter does stomping along the hilly roads near his home amounts to 5,000 miles a year.

Another of the old regulars was Chris Clegg, a 59-year-old security doorman for a Los Angeles department store and still very much an Englishman though he became a U.S. citizen 22 years ago. He had walked 100-milers in England, at Columbia and in Australia. Others in the field included an executive of Hallmark Cards in Kansas City, a professor of anthropology at the University of Missouri and his colleague, a professor of political science, a vegetarian from Springfield, Mass. who is notorious for a fast shuffle that fills other walkers' shoes with pebbles, and a prisoner from the Fordland Honor Camp - Albert Van Dyke - who is serving a sentence for second-degree murder. Van Dyke arrived with a broken jaw. "Showed off doing calisthenics," he said.

To keep youngsters out of the race - in the past they would start it as a lark - the age limit is 19, but the most serious competitors are to be found in the over-40 bracket. "At that age," explained the anthropology professor, Rob Spier, "man should be mature enough to handle boredom. The older competitors in this race seem better disciplined than the younger ones." Augie Hirt, who is only 25, said, "This race is not important to us. We are race walkers, not survivors." Three years ago Hirt entered the race, and after 57 miles he had to be carried off the track. Last year he completed 62¼ miles (100 kilometers). This year he said, "I wish I could finish it once, so that I would never have to try it again." How do they manage to pass the time? Humming a song, perhaps, but mainly counting laps, keeping track of their splits. "After a while," said one walker, "the mind can't handle more than that anyway."

The race was a jaunty affair as long as daylight lasted. The walkers chatted; one listened to the Missouri-Ohio State game on a transistor radio. Enjoying his brief freedom, Van Dyke led the first mile in 9:48, then Hunter took over. His first 25 miles were the fastest ever recorded on the track - 4:26:13. But Hirt, who had set out at an 11-minute pace and had kept an eye on Hunter, caught him after 48 miles.

By that time the race was becoming a nightmare. Heavy showers had made the inside lane a muddy river and the backstretch a lake district. The walkers were forced to weave around the deeper puddles, covering added distance each lap. On the dimly lit track Hunter and Hirt battled for the lead, and Hunter sprinted to a personal best for 50 miles. But eventually the quarter horse pulled away from the Clydesdale.

In the early-morning hours Hirt lapped Hunter with 20 miles to go, and Hunter told him, "These are going to be the hardest 20 miles of your life."

"They were," said Hirt later. Soon he had to shorten his stride because of a twinge in his left hamstring. "At one point," he said, "my body was hurting in six places. It was trying to convince my head that I should stop."

The rain had claimed its victims. O'Neil developed a blister on his left foot and had to retire after 64½ miles, 13½ hours. Clegg, the security man, stopped to rest after 75 miles and got so chilled in his wet clothes that he was unable to start again. When dawn finally came, gray and unfriendly, only seven of the 30 starters were still going for the 100-mile mark.

Hirt, now leading the vigorous Hunter by a mile, resembled a suffering Biblical figure. His eyes were half closed, his feet dragging. His wife Joan walked with him for a few laps, but he could not talk. Leonard Busen, a St. Louis newspaperman, was in third place, and next behind him was Jack Blackburn, a 40-year-old counselor at a drug-control center in Springfield, Ohio, a newcomer to the event. Blackburn had tried out for four Olympics - without success. "I think today I'm going to make the team," he said, walking on like an arthritic old man.

Hirt won in 19:55:16, beating Hunter by 10½ minutes but missing O'Neil's record by half an hour. "I don't believe I did it," he mumbled, sinking onto a bench. When Joan and a nurse led him away, he began to cry softly. Each of the seven still walking at dawn finished the 100 miles in the allotted 24 hours.

"You feel like a baby," said Blackburn after he crossed the line. "You ache so much that you have to show it. You just can't be manly."

Two days later Augie Hirt was feeling much better. In fact, he was able to walk again.

For the record, there were 7 finishers, with Augie winning overall to become American Centurion number 18.

1.	Hirt, Augie	USA	C18	25-Sep-76	Columbia, MO	19:55:16	25	01-Jan-51
2.	Hunter, Chuck	USA	C11	25-Sep-76	Columbia, MO	20:05:50	39	01-Jan-37
3.	Busen, Leonard	USA	C15	25-Sep-76	Columbia, MO	21:49:21	46	16-Mar-30
4.	Blackburn, Jack	USA	C19	25-Sep-76	Columbia, MO	22:11:57	40	21-Nov-35
5.	Spier, Rob	USA	C16	25-Sep-76	Columbia, MO	22:35:01	54	12-Jun-22
6.	Gragg, Bob	USA	C17	25-Sep-76	Columbia, MO	23:37:30	51	19-Aug-25
7.	Argo, John	Canada	C5	25-Sep-76	Columbia, MO	23:43:10	62	29-Apr-14

The following photos shows Augie walking in the race, being helped from the track at the end and then at the presentations.

They say a photo is worth a thousand words and that is certainly the case here.



And now let's hone in on Augie Hirt's wider walking career which reads impressively.

Augie was born in Piqua, Ohio, on 1st January 1951 and studied at McPherson College, a small liberal arts school in central Kansas. During his competitive days at McPherson College, he showed that he was a fine all-round athlete, winning six varsity letters in three sports, cross country (three times), track (twice) and baseball (once).

It was during his time at McPherson College that he started racewalking. He was a long-distance runner then, a good one but not great. "I was improving gradually, but I had so far to go to keep up with guys like Shorter," he said. "In my senior year, a guy on the track team placed in the national racewalking championships. I had always had it in the back of my mind that I could be a good race-walker so I asked him to show me how. Then I raced him, and I beat him. I found I could do better at walking than running. There were a lot of good runners so before a race I would think, 'Will I finish fifth or eighth'. In racewalking, I knew I could finish first or second. You push more for first than fifth. For me, walking is something special. If you find something you are good at, you will work harder and harder to be good."

Yes, Augie was good and he worked hard, developing into a fine international walker in his post-collegiate life. "Once I got out of college, I discovered they had longer races." He moved to Columbia to train with Larry Young, the U.S. racewalker who won bronze medals in the 1968 and 1972 Olympics and remains the only American to medal in the sport. Another of his racewalking friends was Shaul Ladany, an Israeli racewalker and Holocaust survivor who escaped out a window during the 1972 Munich Olympic massacre of 11 fellow team members at the hands of Palestinian gunmen.

His training was consistent and planned - 15 miles a day during the week (4 miles in the morning between 5:45 and 6:15 and 11 miles in the evening from 4 to 5:30 after he got home from his job as a lease accountant with Continental Illinois Bank), with weekends affording an opportunity for a long 20 mile walk on one day and a race on the other. As a matter of interest, his work at the bank at that time was part of a program to help promising American athletes earn money and further themselves in their careers while giving them time to train and compete. It is their small answer to government subsidy of athletes in other countries.



Augie Hirt in racewalking mode, circa mid 1970s

From 1973 through 1979, Augie was named to 13 USA national teams and seven national AAU racewalking championships. Five of his national championships came in the 100km event. He competed in three straight IAAF World Championships between 1975 and 1977. He was the United States' top finisher in the Lugano Cup 50km walk in 1975 and America's second finisher in the 1977 Lugano Cup 50km. His 14th place finish in that event was his top finish in World Championship events. "Nobody expected me to finish that high, and I was sort of surprised myself". His 3 IAAF representations read as follows

1975	Lugano Cup 50km, Le Grande Quevilly, France	21 st	4:31:19
1976	IAAF 50km Championship, Malmo, Sweden	27 th	4:28:35
1977	Lugano Cup 50km, Milton Keynes, England	14 th	4:20:06

In 1975, he raced the 27km leg for the United States in the Airolo-Chiasse 5-man International Relay in Lugano, Switzerland, leading the USA to a second place finish, still the highest finish ever by a American team. He also competed in USA dual meets versus Canada, Mexico, Sweden, England, and Germany. It's a very impressive resume.

But his forte was in the longer distances where he set 11 American racewalking records over 75km, 50 miles, and 100km. He lowered the 100km record for five straight years, from 1974 through 1978, to a best of **10:19:00**, a record that still stands. His American Records for 75km (7:05:46) and 50 miles (7:39:39) also still stand today.

In 1976 Augie finished 2nd in the USA Olympic 50km racewalk trial, but his Olympic dreams were soon dashed when the IOC dropped a number of events from the Olympic program, including the 50km racewalk. The IAAF came to the rescue, scheduling its own 50km world championship in Malmo, Sweden, and Augie was selected to represent America there, finishing 27th in 4:28:35. But it wasn't the Olympics!

Just days after he returned home from that race, still jet-lagged and in recovery mode, he decided to enter the Amateur Athletic Union's National 100 mile Championship racewalk around a track in Columbia, Mo. Planning to walk just half of the race and catch up with friends, he was goaded into finishing by the jibes of another competitor and the rest is history.

The 50km racewalk was reinstated by the IOC for the 1980 Olympics and Augie qualified once again. But he was dealt another huge blow when the U.S. announced it was boycotting the Moscow Olympics as a protest against the Soviet Union's incursion in Afghanistan. For a second time, his Olympic dream had been denied. At that stage, he announced his retirement from the sport.

Augie has continued his involvement in our sport over the intervening years. After he retired in 1980, shoe companies and athletic clubs hired him to teach clinics. "For a while, I made more money from racewalking than I made accounting. For 30 years, I didn't have to buy shoes." He figures he's taught more than 70,000 people (including television personality Oprah Winfrey) the racewalk technique, which he says is great exercise and easier on the joints than running.



Augie takes a racewalk clinic in Sth Bend, Illinois, in 2011

His frame, a half-inch above 6 feet and 166 pounds, is just 8 pounds heavier than it was during his Olympic trials. He walks four times a day with Rose, his 11-year-old golden retriever/border collie mix and also takes her on his longer racewalks. He doesn't enter racewalking competitions. "I've moved on. I just do it for fitness," he says. He does, however, participate in local running events and marathons, racewalking the course and still beating many of the runners.

"I really don't have any regrets. Things aren't fair, but everybody's things aren't fair."

Additional references:

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Addendum

Now I find the above story a bit spooky as it almost exactly parallels my own story. Consider

- Augie was born Jan 1951 and I born in Nov 1950 – so nearly the same age.
- Both of us were decent runners but chose walking instead as the better long term sporting option.
- We each made our respective 1976 Olympic 50km team, only to have the event removed from the Olympics.
- Both were then selected to walk in the IAAF World 50km Championship in Malmo, Sweden, Augie finishing 27th in 4:28:35 and me finishing 23rd in 4:20:23.
- Both of us returned home from this event and qualified as Centurions (USA for Augie and Australian for me) the following month.
- Both of us competed in 2 Lugano Cup World Racewalking Championships (Augie in 1975 and 1977 and me in 1979 and 1981, once Australia was finally eligible to send a team).
- Both of us qualified for the 1980 Olympic 50km but both were denied the trip due to USA and Australian boycotts.
- Both of us have kept up our involvement with the sport in the intervening years.
- And finally and most importantly we are both really good looking!!!



I rest my case!

Tim Erickson

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