

GEORGE LARNER - THE FIRST OLYMPIC WALKING CHAMPION



The modern era of racewalking began with the athletic genius of Britain's and the world's first great walk champion George Lerner. The high quality of his performance, his Olympic triumphs and his unimpeachable style clearly distinguish him as amongst the most outstanding performers in the entire history of racewalking.¹

G. E. (George) Lerner (1875 – 1949), as a member of Brighton and County Harriers, won both the English 7 mile (**52:57**) and 2 mile (**13:57**) titles in 1904 in his first attempt when only 19 years of age. Newspapers of the time commented on *"his impeccable style, his immense stride (nearly 50 inches, attained without apparently without any exaggerated effort), the very slight use made of the arms and the slight forward inclination of the body"*.²

That year, which was only his second year of competition, saw him set up a world 2 mile record of **13:11.4** (Manchester, July 14, 1904) which endured for an unprecedented 39 years. No other world track and field record has ever so much as approached such longevity. Enroute, he also established a world best performance of **6:26.0** for the 1 mile.

The following year Lerner, who was a Brighton policeman, repeated his British Championship wins with times of 52:34 and 13:50. That same year he also set a world best performance of **21:09.4** over 5000m (Brighton, August 19, 1905) and established three world records in a single effort (London, August 19, 1905): 5 miles in **36:00.2**, 7 miles in **50:50.8** and 8 miles 438 yds (**13,275 mtrs.**) within the hour.

Owing to his police duties, Lerner retired following the 1905 season at only 20 years of age, declaring that his duties did not allow him sufficient time to train properly.

Walking came into the Olympics in 1908 at the White City in London. There were two events, the 3,500 metres and the 10 mile and both events were on the track. In view of the Games, the Chief Constable of Brighton was approached and cooperated in every way to help Lerner to prepare. He was then 23 years of age.

Getting back into shape, he won the National 2 mile title in 13:58.4 and was duly selected as part of the English team. E. J. (Ernie) Webb won the National 7 mile title in 53:02.6 and was second to Lerner in the 2 mile title and the stage seemed set for a battle between these two talented walkers. Webb (1872 – 1937), who had had an adventurous life which included a trip around the world before the mast, was working in London at the time.

As expected, both were much too good for the opposition but it was Lerner who took the two gold medals with Webb having to be settle for the silver medals. Lerner's 10 mile win was outstanding. Striding to the front immediately, he broke the hour for the first 8 miles (a very rare feat in those days) and set new World Records for the 9 mile (**1:07:37**) and 10 mile (**1:15:57.4**) distances. His 10 mile world record was to endure for 26 years.

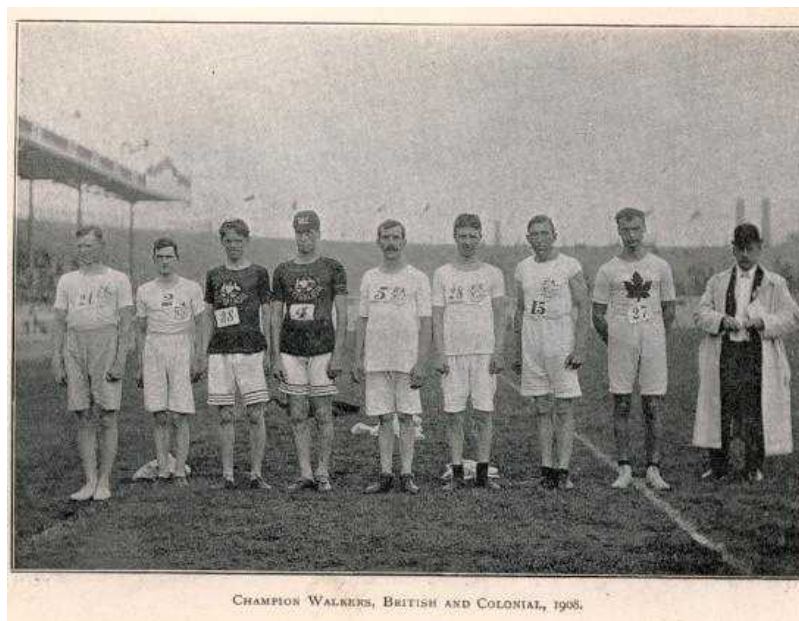
¹ *A Brief History of Race Walking* by Robert G Osterhoudt, Uni. Of Minnesota, 1975

² The cuttings of Bert Gardiner

In fact, England swept all before it and won 5 of the 6 medals on offer. Only New Zealander Harry Kerr with a bronze in the 3,500m walk, stopped a complete whitewash.

1908 Olympic 3,500 metres, London (23 competitors from 8 Nations)

| | | | |
|----|-----------|-----------|---------|
| 1. | G. Larner | England | 14:55.0 |
| 2. | E. Webb | England | 15:08.4 |
| 3. | H Kerr | Australia | 15:43.4 |



The start of the 1908 Olympic 3500m walk. George Larner is wearing number 5.



Larner first and Webb second in the 3500m walk

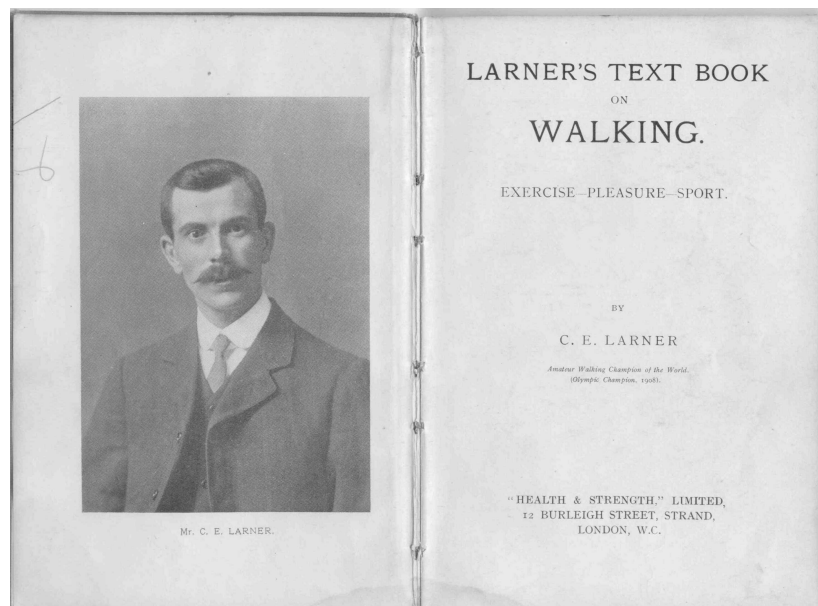
1908 Olympic 10 miles, London (25 competitors from 8 Nations)

| | | | |
|----|------------|---------|-----------|
| 1. | G Larner | England | 1:15:57.4 |
| 2. | E. Webb | England | 1:17:31.0 |
| 3. | E. Spencer | England | 1:21:20.2 |

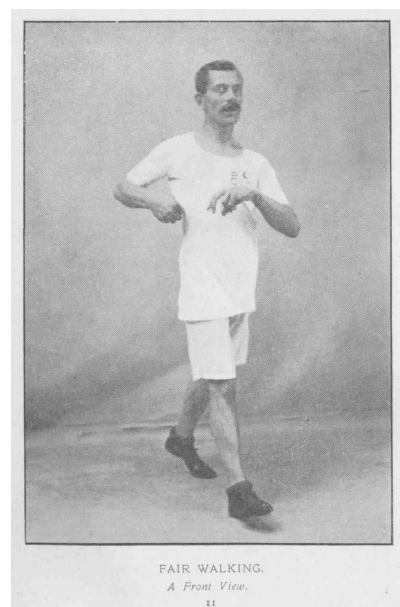
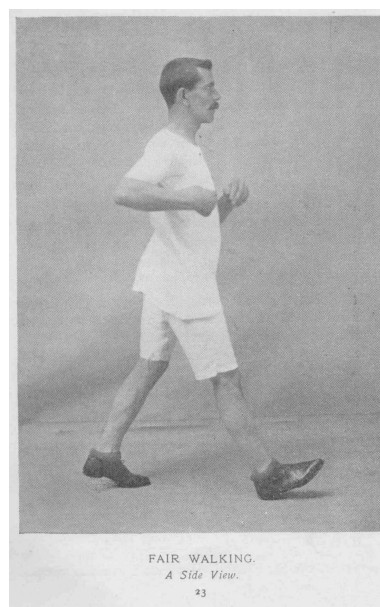
Larner retired once more after these 1908 Games but made one final comeback in 1911 and won the British 7 mile title at Stamford Bridge in London. His winning time of 52:45.6 was still respectable. Perhaps he harboured thoughts of a further Olympics. Whatever the circumstances, history shows that he did not contest the 1912 National titles and it was Webb, then 40 years of age, who spearheaded the English challenge at Stockholm and gained a third Olympic silver medal. On that occasion there was only one walk, 10,000 metres and Webb's time was a fine 46:50.4.

In 1909, he wrote what might be considered the first serious book on racewalking with chapters reading

- I. A Definition of Walking
- II. How to Walk Both Fast and Far
- III. Road Walking
- IV. Track Walking
- V. Training
- VI. On Judging
- VII. Which Deals with Walking as a Pastime and a Few Suggested Rambles
- VIII. The Care of the Feet



Contained within its covers are two photos in which Larner demonstrates correct walking technique



Larner had some eccentric training habits: “*When time permits, all clothing should be removed for a run round a secluded garden, especially if it be raining at the time.*”³

He finished his career holding British records for the 1 mile (**6:26**), the 3 mile (**20:25**), the 4 mile (**27:14**) and the 5000 metres walk. He was also credited with a time of **13:11** for the 2 mile walk. These, when added to his world records for 9 mile and 10 miles, marks him as one of the outstanding walkers of all time. He was indeed a worthy inaugural Olympic walking champion.

Here is a fantastic article on the 1908 Olympic dual gold medallist George Larner of GBR by Alan Buchanan: <https://www.sussexathletics.net/news/the-only-sussex-double-olympic-goldmeddalist/>. The last paragraph reads:

Few sportspersons can expect to have the honour of their name emblazoned on their local bus. When George Larner was born in 1875, there was no such thing as a motor car as we know it, let alone a double decker bus. He however, is celebrated on one of the Brighton & Hove buses, and is one of the only sportspersons and is the only athlete who rubs shoulders, metaphorically, with the great and good associated with the City.



Larner shows the strain as he wins gold



The George Larner Bus

³ *The Official Centenary History of the AAA*, Peter Lovesey, 1979, p138