

HAROLD WHITLOCK - 1936 OLYMPIC WALKING CHAMPION

Harold Whitlock was born in 1904 in England. Working in London as a motor mechanic, he raced with Metropolitan Walking Club. Tall, dark and lean, he had the perfect style, matched with the ability and patience needed to get to the top. In his late twenties, he burst onto the long distance walking scene with a series of superb walks.

His first major success was a record breaking win in the Hastings to Brighton walk in 1932. His time for the tough 37 mile walk was **5:56:03**, beating the record of the great Tommy Green by some 4 minutes. From then on, he was virtually unbeatable at anything over 20 miles and, if not for the Second World War, would have had even greater success.

1933 saw him win the R.W.A. 50 km championship in **4:41:54**. This was the first of 6 National 50 km titles that he would amass over a 7 year period.

In 1934, he revisited the Hastings to Brighton walk, winning again in an even faster time of **5:46:45**. Tommy Green had won the event in 1933 and broken Whitlock's record. Now Whitlock returned the favour and took some 5 minutes off Green's time. As Green was the 1932 Olympic 50 km champion and the unmatched king of the road, Whitlock's performances omened a changing of the guard. It was to be quick in coming.

The most prestigious walking event at that time was the London to Brighton, held each September over 52 miles. With distance walking at the peak of its popularity, this race boasted fields of up to 100 and the British ultra walking set the world standard. The 1934 edition saw a new champion – Harold Whitlock – in a very good first up time of **8:17:23**. It was the first of 4 victories in a row for the Londoner.

1935 was an astonishing year for Whitlock by any standard. He started off in June with a win in the Bradford Walk (32½ miles) with **4:45:22**, breaking Tommy Green's course record on his first attempt. He then backed up for a second R.W.A. 50 km title in July, this time in an improved **4:39:00**. This was a monumental battle between the young contender Whitlock and the old champion Green. They fiercely contested the lead for most of the race before Whitlock eventually won by a mere 29 seconds.

Then in September, he won his second London to Brighton crown, this time in an astounding time of **7:53:50**, becoming the first walker to break the magical 8 hour barrier. His course record was not beaten until 1956 when Don Thompson lowered the mark to 7:45:32.

On 5 October 1935 he participated in and dominated a special time-trial event set up at the White City stadium in London. Leaving all the other walkers in his wake, he set a swathe of records that included an official World Record for the 30 mile distance (**4:29:31.8**). He also set British records for 40 miles (**6:07:07**), 50 miles (**7:44:47.2**), 6 hours (**39 miles, 473 yds**), 7 hours (**45 miles 803 yds**) and 8 hours (**51 miles 1042 yds**).

But no career is without its ups and downs In Birmingham in 1935, Whitlock was disqualified and the astonishment was general. A press correspondent of the day reported

I watched Whitlock closely, particularly in the early stages, where speedy walking was expected. In fact, I missed him only for a short way at the half distance, and in the 14th mile, he appeared to be enjoying his tussle with Hopkins. Certainly nothing appeared to me to be in any way doubtful at that point. Indeed, I remarked to several people around me on the remarkably fine and fast walking both men were showing. Yet Whitlock was ruled out soon afterwards.

Here we had disqualified a very conscientious man who has made walking a real study. Guardsmanlike in action and stride, Whitlock does not wriggle or "jump" his body. It did, in fact, seem that Whitlock had shown us what fair walking was. He has always been accepted as a fine example not only by the road walking officials and competitors but by clubs all over the world.

So just when we believed that the tricky question of race walking had definitely been settled, we see one official able to smash the whole theory in one short moment by ruling Whitlock out. I find myself wondering if the decision is correct.

1936 was the Olympic year and Whitlock timed his preparation to a tee. A second win in the Bradford walk in June was the ideal lead into a season of hard racing. The 1936 R.W.A. 50 km title was held on July 4 in Derby and was the official trial for the Berlin Games. In a race of great depth, Whitlock won in a world best time of **4:30:38**, Hopkins was second in 4:31:01 and Bentley was third in 4:33:32. Defending Olympic champion Green was relegated to 4th place even though his finishing time would have won all previous editions of this event. Such was the depth in England at that time.

The Olympics soon came around and one can imagine the excitement for the young London mechanic as he entered the heady and controversial Berlin Games atmosphere. The Opening Ceremony was held before a crowd of over 100,000 in the Olympic Stadium on July 30. A few days later, in an exciting race over the streets of inner Berlin, it was Whitlock who broke away at the 20 km mark and triumphed in a new Olympic record time of **4:30:41.4**, only 3 seconds outside his best time recorded just a month earlier. His time was even more meritorious considering that he had to battle stormy windy weather and rough cobblestoned roads (so rough that the British committee considered protesting). History records the first 8 places as follows

1. Harold WHITLOCK	GBR	4.30.41.4	OR
2. Arthur SCHWAB	SWI	4.32.09.2	
3. Adalberts BUBENKO	URS	4.32.42.2	
4. Jaroslav STORK	CZE	4.34.00.2	
5. Edgar BRUUN	NOR	4.34.53.2	
6. Fritz BLEIWEISS	GER	4.36.48.4	
7. Karl REINIGER	SWI	4.40.45.0	
8. Etienne LAISNE	FRA	4.41.40.0	



Whitlock strides over cobblestones to victory in the 1936 50 km even while one of the everpresent Nazi soldiers looks on.

But his year was not yet complete as the London to Brighton remained. A month later, he won his third straight 'Brighton' in **8:01:35**, another great performance from a man who was now held to be virtually unbeatable on the road.

Over the next 4 years, Whitlock continued on his merry way with win after win and record after record. Highlights included 3 more wins in the Bradford Walk (1937, 1938 and 1940), matching wins in the Liverpool to Manchester walk (1938 and 1939), a fourth straight win in the London to Brighton in 1937 (8:02:38) and 3 more wins in the R.W.A. 50 km championship (1937 – 4:38:43, 1938 – 4:43:02 and 1939 – 4:40:43). He also recorded his best time of **1:33:31** for 20 km during this period (1 August 1937 in Stockholm).

His 1937 win in the R.W.A. 50 km is of interest as third place was taken by his brother G.B.R. (Rex) Whitlock. From then on, Rex was a regular placegetter in the major longer distance events and seemed destined to follow in his brother's footsteps to Olympic selection.

Harold Whitlock further cemented his place in history with a great race in the 1938 European Championship 50 km event in Paris. Times were slow and the conditions were tough with everyone suffering. But as usual, Whitlock was the one who made the most of the opportunity and won by 2 minutes over a world class field.

1. Harold WHITLOCK	GBR	4.41.51
2. Herbert DILL	GER	4.43.54
3. Edgar BRUUN	NOR	4.44.35
4. Fritz BLEIWEISS	GER	4.45.24
5. Antonio de MAESTRI	ITA	4.53.56
6. Evald SEGERSTROM	SWE	4.56.11
7. Giuseppi GOBBATO	ITA	4.56.20
8. Antonius TOSCANI	HOL	4.53.36

Whitlock had now been at the top for some 7 years and as 1939 started, he showed no signs of slowing – if anything, he was still improving. 1939 saw him win his first R.W.A 20 Miles championship in **2:51:29** – after bronze in 1935 and silvers in 1936 and 1937. His 1939 win in the Manchester to Blackpool rewrote the record books as usual. The newspapers reported as follows

Going ahead at the half way stage, Harold Whitlock, the Olympic champion, romped away from all opposition to lower the record for the 36½ mile Liverpool to Manchester course by no fewer than 11 min. 53 sec. on Saturday. The race was the fifth to be organised by the Daily Dispatch, and by his victory Whitlock won the 50-guinea trophy outright – the first competitor to do so. Whitlock's time was 5 hr. 20 min. 22sec., compared with the previous best for the course of 5 hr. 32min. 15 sec. set up by himself last year.

Add to that a record sixth R.W.A. 50 km title and the world was still at his feet. But his plans of a second Olympic title were shattered by the War declaration and for the next 6 years, athletics took a backstage to the whirlpool of world conflict..

He eventually returned to walking in 1946 and, at 42 years of age, still managed second in the R.W.A 20 miles. But that was one of the few appearances for Whitlock over the next couple of years, thus opening the door for his brother Rex to gain his own Olympic guernsey in the 1948 Olympic 50 km event which was subsequently held over a gruelling course in hot conditions. Swedish champion Ljunggren led from start and had built his lead to 40 seconds by the 5 km mark. At the half way mark, passed in 2:12:17, he had increased the lead to 5 minutes with Whitlock in second and Martineau of Great Britain in third. Whitlock was forced to retire at 35 km and Ljunggren, walking smoothly, entered the stadium nearly a mile in front to win gold. Behind him 48 year old Tebbs Lloyd-Johnson made a superlative effort to move up into second place, only to give way to Gaston in the closing stages. With his third place, Lloyd-Johnson became the oldest person ever to win an Olympic track and field medal.

1952 saw Harold Whitlock back pounding the roads and recording times that sent a chill through the younger walkers. He started his season in early June with the Bradford Whit Walk which he had won a record 5 times already. This time sporting history was made as he dead-heated with Charles Colman to win again. Whitlock was back!

July saw him place third in the R.W.A. 50 km title behind Tunbridge and his brother Rex. It was good enough for Olympic Selection and he was off to Helsinki for his second Olympics.



G. B. R. (Rex) Whitlock in the 1952 Helsinki Olympic walk

The Helsinki result makes for interesting reading. Whitlock's younger brother was fourth and Whitlock himself was a creditable 11th out of 28 finishers. His time of 4:45:12 was still competitive, especially for a 48 year old walker.

1. Giuseppe DORDONI	ITA	4:28:07.8	OR
2. Josef DOLEZAL	CZE	4:30:17.8	
3. Antal ROKA	HUN	4:31:27.2	
4. G. B. R. WHITLOCK	GBR	4:32:21.0	

5. Sergei LOBASTOV	SOV	4:32:34.2
6. Vladimir UKHOV	SOV	4:32:51.6
7. Dumitru PARASCHIVESCU	ROM	4:41:05.2
8. Ionescu BABOIE	ROM	4:41:52.8
9. John LJUNGREN	SWE	4:43:45
10. KRESEVICH	ITA	4:44:30
11. Harold WHITLOCK	GRB	4:45:12

Surprisingly, he never became a Centurion. The only time he ever tried was in 1952 when the 100 mile event was held on a course from London to Bath. The Centurion History records

The 1951 London to Brighton and Back walk had been so successful (21 new Centurions) that it was decided to use London as the hub for the annual 100 mile event, to provide as widespread an appeal as possible. The 1952 event was from London to Bath, retracing the historical route when Roman Centurions marched the road between the two famous cities. The favourite to win the race was Percy Reading, the winner of the 1946 track race, but serious competition was expected to come from the Whitlock brothers, Harold and Rex. Harold failed to finish but Rex went on to win in 17:44:40.



Harold Whitlock strides out in an English competition

As his competitive career came towards its finish, he moved into the field of English racewalking administration. He was the Secretary of the R.W.A. from 1948 to 1953 and then had a stint as President from 1955 to 1956. Under the auspices of the British Amateur Athletics Association, he published, in 1957, a definitive book on racewalking. The book, simply called "Race Walking", covered technique, how to train for the various distances, how to prepare for races and even touched on such things as diet and supplementary exercises. It was a reflection of the man himself and his scientific approach to the sport and it supplied the basic principles from which many countries produced world-class walkers.

He went on to become a member of the I.A.A.F. Walking Commission and was awarded the position of Chief Judge in the 1960 Olympic 50 km event in Rome as well as at many other major competitions. He also became the English National Walking Coach in the early sixties and was instrumental over a number of years in moving the conservative English walking community into the new era of walking the came with the 1960's.

He also played a major role part in the introduction of a 20 km event into the international program and in the introduction of the Lugano Cup competition.

He died on Wednesday 8 January 1986 at 81 years of age, the undisputed elder statesman of British racewalking and one of the absolute legends of the sport.

His place in racewalking history is assured on all levels – as a consummate competitor, as an Olympic champion, as a top administrator and as an outstanding ambassador of the sport. Few walkers walk as tall as Harold Whitlock in the long history of the sport.