

HEW NEILSON – CENTURION AND 24 HOUR WORLD RECORD HOLDER

*Much of the information for this article was taken from the 1997 edition of the Centurions History. Further information has been taken from the February 1986 Race Walking Record and from discussions with Fred Baker.
Tim Erickson, 22 September 2006*



Shortly after attending the funeral of Harold Whitlock on the previous day, Hew Neilson, past President of Woodford Green A.C., Secretary of the Centurions and world record holder for the 24 hour walk, died of a heart attack in the early hours of the morning of Thursday 9th January 1986. This marked the end of perhaps the most extraordinary career seen so far in Centurion circles.

Hew experienced a Dickensian childhood, coming from a broken home and forced into lodging accommodation at 14 years of age. While still in his early teens, and after a football match, he accepted a challenge from his fellow teammates to walk from Cambridge to London and back. Suffice to say that its successful completion resulted in him joining the Polytechnic Harriers and, at 17 years of age, he represented them in their team for Surrey Walking club's London to Brighton walk. Surrey W.C. had a strict rule before the Second World War of limiting entries to competitors over 21 years of age. So for four years Hew declared his age as 21, 22, 23 and 24. Then when he reached 21 years of age, he duly returned his age to 21. The story goes that some Surrey W.C. officials were very miffed at the deception but all was forgiven and Hew continued to take part until the race along the Brighton Road course finished in 1985. It was an association of over 50 years!

Hew was also a good track walker, placing third in the A.A.A. 2 Mile Championship in 1939, although of course his real forte remained the longer distances.

At this time, the Second World War intervened and Hew, like all those of his era, put their sporting aspirations to one side and came to the rescue of their country.

In August 1948 with the War finally behind him and in his thirties, he became Centurion 145 with a fine second place in the Motspur Park 24 Hour track walk. His distance was 103 mls 442 yds. His 100 mile time in transit was 23:03:50.

This started an amazing period of long distance excellence. Through the remaining years of his career, Hew completed the 100 mile distance in the annual Centurions walk on 20 occasions. This stood as the most Centurion finishes of all time (ahead of Fred Baker on 19) until beaten by the amazing Sandra Brown in 2006, and included first placings in 1955, 1960 and 1965.

His 1960 Centurion appearance remains on record as the most magnificent 24 hour track walk ever witnessed. For some time Centurions and other long distance specialists had wanted such a race in order to match themselves against the performances of others over the previous 50 or more years. In order to meet this request a special invitation meeting was arranged by Walton A.C. at their headquarters at Stompond Lane, Walton-on-Thames, on 14-15 October.

The records to be attacked were impressive. The British records were shared between Tom Hammond who in 1908 walked 131 m 580 yds in 24 hours, Tom Richardson who in 1936 had walked 100 miles in 17:35:04 before retiring at 18 hours and Percy Reading who in 1946 had walked 129m 749 y in 24 hours. The world record was held by Henri Caron of France who in 1950 had recorded a distance of 132m 1320 y in 24 hours.

Apart from the long distance specialists, some of the fast men were also invited to attack records up to 4 hours and 50 km. In the shorter event, Don Thompson, the recent winner of the 50 km gold medal at the Rome Olympics, broke his own National records at 20 miles, 3 hours, 25 miles, 4 hours, 30 miles and 50 km.

To return to the main event which by co-incidence fell the 10th anniversary of Caron's 1950 world record, 15 of the best long distance walkers in the country faced the starter. For the first 12 hours a thrilling race unfolded, but the record of E. C. Horton, No. 63, set up in 1914, remained intact. At this point some of the competitors began to fall by the wayside. One of the first to go was Frank O'Reilly who was lying in third place at the time, having dropped back from second. He had covered 70 miles in just over 12 hours, such was the quality of this race. He was feeling very unwell but struggled on to reach 78 miles in 14 hours. In the meantime, Hew was having a terrific race at the front with Colin Young a consistent 2 miles adrift in second place.

At 13 hours Hew claimed his first record of the race with 77m 30y, beating Richardson's 1936 distance of 76m 930y. His second record came at 80 miles in 13h 34m 37s as opposed to 13h 55m 12s. From here he broke records all the way up to 24 hours. Young was closing slightly but it would be a few more hours before he also started to better the previous British figures. The progress of the various records is shown in the table below.

	Previous Records	World Record	British Records	New Records	
	Tom Hammond (G. W) 1908	Henri Caron (Fra) 1950	Tom Richardson (G. B.) 1936	Hew Neilson (G.B) 1960	Colin Young (G. B.) 1960
14 Hours	81 m 1100y	82m 788y	80m 950y	82m 517y	79m 1705y
15 Hours	Florimond Cornet	87m 566y	86m 569y	87m 1040y	85m 1470y
90 Miles	16h 09 50.s	15h 30m 12s	15h 40m 48s	15h 28m 19s	15h 53m 10s
16 Hours	89m 435y	92m 689y	91m 524y	92m 1318y	90M 1015y
17 Hours	94m 668y	No Record	96m 1152y	98m 164y	95m 1570y
100 Miles	18h 04m 10s	17h 47m 46s	17h 35m 04s	17h 18m 51s	17h 48 05
18 Hours.	99m 1067y	101m 429y	101m 1230y Ret. Percy Reading (G. B.) 1946	103m 615y	101m 6ly
19 Hours	105m 275y	106m 1646y	105m 466y	107m 1175y	105m 1545y
110 Miles	19h 58m 40s	19h 33m 41s	19h 57m 16s	19h 25m 48s	19h 45m 54s
20 Hours	110m 203y	112m 464y	110m 410y	112m 1262y	111m 330y
21 Hours	115m 575y	117m 342y	Hammond	117m 1150y	116m 265y
120 Miles	21h 52m 58s	21h 32m 02s	Hammond	21h 24m 16s	21h 46m 23s
22 Hours	120m 1156y	122m 712y	Hammond	122m 1432y	121m 235y
125 Miles	22h 48m 21s	22h 30m 06s	Hammond	22h 25m 30s	22h 46m 49s
23 Hours	125m 1354y	127m 1021y	Hammond	127m 1510y	126m 118y
130 Miles	23h 45m 51s	23h 27m 10s	Hammond	23h 25m 27s	23h 47m 09S
24 Hours	131 m 580y	132m 1320y	129m 749y*	133m 21y	131 m 327y

From the figures above it can be seen that each of these walkers had a great race in their respective events, with each of them establishing or breaking various records.

In the case of Tom Hammond (1908) there was only one amateur record of note, that of Fowler- Dixon (1877), 100 miles in 20h 36m 08s. There were of course professional records of both time and distance, but these could not be considered as this was an amateur race. It is known from the reports of his race that he had a few bad patches during the race, which are believed to be mainly in the later stages. He had taken the lead at 30 miles and, by maintaining a pace of just over 5 miles an hour, he was never passed.

Tom Richardson (1936) had only one thing in mind - to win the 100 mile race and hopefully set up an unbeatable target for others to follow. Such was his effort that when he reached 100 miles he had to rest for a few minutes before starting off again and then retiring at exactly 18 hours.

Henri Caron (1950) was aware of the records of Richardson and Hammond, but only in estimated terms. His priorities were to attack the record held by his countryman Florimond Cornet and the specific kilometre time records. In this endeavour he was successful at 14, 15 & 16 hours and 140 Km. It would appear that after setting these records he had a problem or had to take a short rest. His time at 150 km was 16h 35m 05s, it had taken him 35 minutes to cover the last 1.3 km (approx. 1 mile)! Up until 16 hours he had been in front of Richardson's records. At 100 miles he was 12 min 45 secs behind, but then 160.9344 km has no particular significance to a Frenchman.

New Neilson had only one thing on his mind, to win the race, especially bearing in mind the quality of the opposition. He had won a road race and had completed more races of 100 miles or over than any other British walker. The only thing he had not done was to win on the track, which is where he made his debut in 1948. He was aware of the records held by Caron and Richardson, but treated the beating of them as a bonus if that was what it would take to win the race. At 80 miles he was ahead of Richardson but slightly behind Caron. By 90 miles he was just under 2 minutes in front of Caron, by 100 miles his lead over Caron was almost 29 minutes, adding further weight to the assumption that Caron must have stopped for a while.

Neilson's pace so far had been consistent throughout the race. Colin Young is the only walker in this table of figures who did not set any records, due no doubt to the presence of Neilson in the same race. His objective, like Neilson, was to win the race, but he had a more pressing task to fulfil first. That was to complete 100 miles and in so doing, qualify for Centurionship. He was the only person to qualify from this race and became one of the few Centurions in the Centurion handbook to have a race heading to himself. From a steady start he gradually gained ground on the leaders, and by 50 miles he was in front of the old figures set up by Hammond in 1908, a position he maintained throughout the race. However he remained approx. $\frac{1}{4}$ mile behind Richardson and the same 2 miles behind Neilson, whom he was gaining on slightly with each lap.

In a 24 hour race, fortunes can change quite easily and it is usually the fast few hours where the race is won or lost, or records are broken. In his race, Hammond kept up his steady pace, attacking at 5 mile intervals. His 125th mile took 10 min 45 sees, the 126th was 14 min 05 sees, but it was in the last hour where he made the maximum effort, covering more than 5½ miles to set a record that would last for 42 years. With Richardson retiring in 1936 the next records to be set were by Percy Reading (1946). At 100 miles he was more than 23 minutes behind Richardson but more importantly he was about 5½ minutes ahead of Hammond. He managed to maintain his pace for the next 2 hours setting new records (by about 200 yards) at 19 hours, 110 miles and 20 hours. Thereafter his pace dropped and he was unable to get back in front of Hammond. Caron, having got over his obvious problems earlier in his race, was now going all out for the 200 km record and Hammond's distance record of 212,964 km. He was successful in his efforts and set new figures for 19 hours and 110 miles upwards, in addition to those for 170 - 210 km.

In the 1960 race, Colin Young, with his 100 miles safely behind him, kept his momentum to stay ahead of Hammond; and in so doing he was able to unlap himself 3 times from Neilson and also get ahead of the figures set by Reading. It was only in the last 20 minutes or so that he went behind Hammond's figures to finish an annoying 253 yards short of the old record. In the meantime, Neilson, although slowing slightly, maintained his lead at the front of the race. His lead of 29 minutes over Caron at 100 miles was reduced to 8 minutes at 110 and 120 miles. By 125 miles it had come down to 4½ minutes and with just over half an hour to go at 130 miles, to 1 min 40 sees. It was beginning to look like he would not capture the 24 hour record, but a last half hour at over 5¼ m.p.h. pace, meant that he finished 461 yards ahead of Caron.

The records set by Hew Neilson in this remarkable race are shown in bold type. The list is not complete as he would have certainly broken some of the metric records, but it seems that times were not taken at metric distances. An interesting point to note about this race is that six of the Centurions who were there to witness it had also been present 52 years earlier when Tom Hammond set his records.

In 1962, Hew was elected as Vice Captain of the Centurions. He held this position until 1981 when he ascended to the position of Secretary, a post that he retained until his untimely death in 1986. The Woodford Green A.C. 24 Hour track walk, which he had been organising at the time of his death, was renamed The Hew Neilson memorial track race and went ahead on the last two days of May 1986. 27 walkers started, including Pam Ficken, Hew Neilson's daughter, who although not a race walker managed a creditable 25 miles in just over 6 hours, a fitting tribute to her father. 18 walkers completed 100 miles, 5 of them for the first time, Bob Dobson won the 24 hour event with 127 miles, not far ahead of Geoff Tranter with 125½ miles. The first of the 5 new Centurions, Phil Carroll of Yorkshire Walking Club, was presented with a new trophy which had been donated by the Neilson family, "The Hew Neilson 145 Trophy". It was a silver salver with Hew's Centurion badge as its centrepiece.

To the day of his death Hew made a point of competing in every walking race of importance, and maintained this unquenchable enthusiasm for over fifty years. Surely athletics has never had a greater ambassador. As the Secretary of the Centurions Walking Club he spared no effort in the promotion of Long Distance events, and extended its comradeship throughout the World.