

## JERZY HAUSLEBER (1930-2014)



I hardly know where to start when reporting the death last week of Jerzy Hausleber, the Polish coach who revolutionised the world of racewalking in the 1970's and who took Mexico from an unknown minnow to the world's strongest walking nation in less than 10 years.

Hausleber was born in September 1930 in Poland and died of cardiac arrest in March 2014 in Mexico City, Mexico, aged 83. As a young man in the Polish navy, he had visited Mexico in 1949 when his ship berthed in Veracruz. Little did he realise at that stage that he would spend the better part of his life in that country and become, in the process, a national hero.

It all came about in the leadup to the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City when, in 1966, General Jose de Jesus Clark Flores, then President of the Mexican Olympic Committee, initiated a project to bring international coaches to Mexico in certain target sports to increase the chances of medals at their first home Olympics. Why was walking targeted - perhaps the altitude factor mixed with the natural fluency and endurance of the Mexican people, or perhaps it was just seen as an easy target sport due to its small footprint internationally at the time. Regardless of why, he was one of 7 instructors brought to Mexico as part of the program, arriving on 30<sup>th</sup> May 1966 and taking on a small group of 6 athletes. He was a little known coach and an ex-boxer. His racewalking credentials were few. Can you imagine the learning curve in going from Poland to Mexico in the sixties - language, customs and expectations to name a few.

One of those early pupils was an unknown 29 year old army sergeant by the name of Jose Pedraza. He was quick to learn, claiming the nation's first international title when he won the 10,000m walk at the 1966 Central American and Caribbean Games in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He was soon to become world famous in what was the most controversial Olympic Games of all time. Commercialism had become an issue in the form of sponsorship and the wearing of branded running shoes (Nike and Adidas). The Black Power movement was beginning to find a voice. The Warsaw Bloc countries had invaded Czechoslovakia. The Mexican government had brutally put down riots over the poor living conditions of the impoverished population. And finally the altitude of Mexico City (7,347 feet above sea level) was the main topic of discussion for months before the Games. Many sports commentators were predicting deaths in the endurance events and much attention was focussed on the marathon and long walks.

If there were concerns about the altitude, it did not deter the athletes and good fields of 33 and 36 walkers contested the two walks - with Pedraza entered in both events. The great Russian walker Golubnichiy, in his third Olympics, was always going to be the walker to beat in the 20km championship. The World Record holder since 1958 (1:27:05), with Olympic gold and bronze medals already in his possession and coming off silver medals in the 1966 European and the 1967 Lugano Cup 20 km events, he was a big-event performer and the one who was seemed strong enough to beat the altitude.

The event was an unusual one. The starting time was 4.30pm and competitors finished the last 2km in darkness. Early on, Golubnichiy (USSR) and Laird (USA), who were leading, went straight instead of turning into the circuit. They lost some 20 yards but Golubnichiy caught the leaders again within 200 yards, while Laird never recovered and finished a disappointing 25<sup>th</sup>.

Oxygen debt hit most competitors early in the race and the second half was a struggle for all but the leading few. After 85 minutes of hard walking, Golubnichiy entered the stadium in first place, followed closely by teammate Nikolai Smaga. Then the 60,000-plus spectators went wild as a third walker appeared – Mexican champion Jose Pedraza. 200 metres from the finish, Pedraza passed Smaga and set his sights on Golubnichiy. As Pedraza pushed his body to the limit, he received three cautions but it would have taken a suicidal judge to disqualify the determined Mexican while the stadium echoed with chants of "May-hee-co" and "Pay-drah-zah." An international incident was avoided when Golubnichiy drew away slightly in the home stretch to win by a mere three yards. Mexican racewalking had arrived!



**The famous finish – Golubnichiy looks over his shoulder with 90m to go to see Pedrza closing quickly.**

Money soon flowed into the fledgling racewalking program and Hausleber was able to expand, bringing more walkers into the program. It did not happen overnight and not with generation-one but by 1976, Mexico was the undisputed top country in their new national sport of racewalking. Olympic medals in 1976 (Daniel Bautista 20km gold), 1984 (Raul Gonzalez 50km gold and 20km silver and Ernesto Canto 20km gold), 1992 (Carlos Mercenario 20km silver) and 1996 (Bernardo Segura 20km bronze), along with a whole string of world records, World Racewalking Cup medals and IAAF World Championship medals flowed from the program.(official records indicate that his charges won 118 medals in international competitions).

Hausleber's lasting contribution to the world of racewalking was his "Mexican" style. Gone was the classic "heel and toe", replaced by the fluid, "foot-hitting-the ground-going-backwards" mechanics that propelled the sport's performances to unheard-of heights. It must be said that some judges took a while to embrace the revolution, and "el profe" (the Prof - as Hausleber was often called) had to endure criticism for a string of Mexican DQs. What Hausleber taught Mexican stars like Gonzalez, Bautista, Mercenario, Mendoza, the dogged Bermudez and the supreme elegance that was Ernesto Canto, the Mexicans taught the rest of us. (Extracted from the email that Canada's Roger Burrows sent to people on his list.)

The world came to Mexico to learn from him and he opened his doors to one and all. It was tough work with hard sessions at heady altitudes and no one could keep up with the Mexicans. Yet through it all, the Mexicans flowed with a new found rhythm and confidence and a speed that was staggering to behold. The walking drills that Hausleber developed and promoted are now used world wide.



**The always impeccably dressed Hausleber with some of his best - Raul Gonzales, Daniel Bautista and Ernesto Canto (photo <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/adrenalina/2014/03/13/948450#image-3>)**

Hausleber was in Mexico for good. He was naturalised in 1984, received the decoration of the Aztec Eagle in 1993 and won the National Sports Award twice (in 1995 and 2011). The auditorium of the National Coaching School Sports (ENED) and the track of the National Center for Talent Development Sports and High Performance (CNAR) bear his name.

Even after bad health forced his retirement from the program, he continued to receive from the Mexican government, through CONADE (National Commission for Physical Culture and Sport), a monthly salary of 29,800 pesos, a chauffeur, a nurse and medical expenses.

Olympic champions Daniel Bautista and Ernesto Canto led the group of former athletes who attended his funeral service last week in Mexico City. Others present included the CONADE director Jesus Mena and the President of the Mexican Olympic Committee, Carlos Padilla.

His death drew tributes from many senior public figures and also many of the athletes he coached.

*“This is a great loss for the sport and also for the Mexican walking. He was the coach who achieved the most in any sport for our country. No one produced so many Olympic medalists, World champions, Pan American and Central American winners,”* commented Ernesto Canto, who won the 20km race walk at the 1983 IAAF World Championships and 1984 Olympic Games. *“There was nobody who was his equal, he leaves a great legacy. Not only was he an extraordinary coach, but he was also a great person and extraordinary human being.”*

Carlos Mercenario, the 1992 Olympic Games 50km silver medallist and three-time winner at the IAAF World Race Walking Cup, also paid tribute to his mentor. *“Nobody led the way he did. Mexican sport in the international context has never had such good results. From Jose Pedraza in 1968 (the 1968 Olympic Games 20km race walk silver medallist and Mexico’s first Olympic medallist in athletics) right up until the most recent medals, they were all a product of his knowledge.”*

Links for further viewing and reading: - check out the first link which is a fantastic 13 minute video on the history of Mexican race walking and Jerzy Hausleber by Mexican journalist Antonio Rosique.

[www.marciaitaliana.com/ita/visualizza\\_video.aspx?id=27](http://www.marciaitaliana.com/ita/visualizza_video.aspx?id=27)

<http://omarchador.blogspot.pt/2014/03/morreu-jerzy-hausleber-1930-2014.html>

[http://www.marciaitaliana.com/ita/dettagli\\_news.aspx?id=1720](http://www.marciaitaliana.com/ita/dettagli_news.aspx?id=1720)

<http://www.iaaf.org/news/iaaf-news/jerzy-hausleber-death>

<http://www.excelsior.com.mx/adrenalina/2014/03/13/948450>



**Hausleber jokes with Ernesto Canto in 2011 on the occasion of his National Sports Award**

Tim Erickson

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