

## JOHN LJUNGGREN – SWEDISH GREAT

Sweden was one of the few countries that remained neutral during the Second World War and this meant that day to day life could continue there while the rest of the world went mad. Swedish runners and walkers continued to train and race and consequently, in the period following the war, they dominated the world scene.

The great Verner Hardmo set 29 ratified and unratified walking world records between 1943 and 1945, at distances ranging from 3000 meters to 10 miles. His World Record for the 10,000m at that time stood at 42:39.6. John Michaelsson set a World Record of 1:32:28.4 for the 20 km track walk in 1942. Olle Andersson set a World Record of 25.531 km for the 2 Hour track walk in 1945. Harry Olsson set a World Record of 2:28:57.4 for the 30 km track walk in 1943.

John Ljunggren was amongst the list of elite Swedish racewalkers of that period. An accountant by trade, he had made his debut in 1936 with 4<sup>th</sup> place in a 10 km walk in Bredaryd. However, the War then intervened and he had to wait a further 10 years before he could make his international debut.

In the first major championship after the end of the War, the 1946 European Championships in Stockholm, Swedish walkers, as expected, won both walks. Michaelsson won the 10,000m track walk by 58 seconds and Ljunggren convincingly won the 50 km by over 4 minutes.

This was the start of an amazing international career for Ljunggren who was at that time already 26 years old. First the vital statistics

Full name:	John Arthur Ljunggren		
Height:	5'10" (178 cm)		
Weight:	130 lbs (59 kg)		
Born:	September 9, 1919 in Forsheda, Jönköping, Sweden		
Died:	January 13, 2000 in Bor, Jönköping, Sweden		
PBs:	10000m track	46:08	1957
	20 km road	1:31:19	1956
	50 km road	4:19:40	1956

There were only two major international competitions on offer in those days – the Olympics and the European Championships, each spaced 4 years apart. Hence Ljunggren's next big appointment was in 1948 when the Olympics were being held in London.



**Ljunggren in the 1948 Olympic 50 km event on left and in the 1952 Swedish Olympic Handbook on right**

21 competitors started the 1948 Olympic 50 km race which was held over a gruelling course in hot conditions. As expected, the pencil thin Ljunggren, seemingly unaffected by the heat, 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 Harold

Whitlock, the defending champion, in second and Martineau of Great Britain in third. Whitlock was forced to retire at 35 km and Martineau began to lose further ground. 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. 16 walkers finished the event, 5 retired during the race and there were no disqualifications. This was without doubt Ljunggren's greatest victory – and gave him Olympic gold to add to his European gold.

1.	<b>John LJUNGGREN</b>	<b>SWE</b>	<b>4:41:52</b>
2.	Gaston GODEL	SWI	4:48:17
3.	Tebbs LLOYD JOHNSON	GBR	4:48:31
4.	Edgar BRUUN	NOR	4:53:18
5.	Harold MARTINEAU	GBR	4:53:58

Two years later, in 1950, he took silver in the 50 km event at the European Championships in Brussels with a similar time, 4:43:25.

But come 1952 and his Olympic 50 km defense was in trouble. Despite walking better than ever and despite the fact that he now had two world records to his name, he could not cope with the bitterly cold conditions in Helsinki and faded to 9<sup>th</sup>, struggling home in 4:43:45.

In the 1954 European Championships in Bern in Switzerland, he contested both the 10,000m track walk (13<sup>th</sup> in 49:19) and the 50 km road walk (4<sup>th</sup> in 4:38:09).

In the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, he was selected to walk in both the 20 km and the 50 km walks but nearly didn't make it. A few days before leaving for Melbourne, he was hit with a badly poisoned toe and looked like being forced to withdraw. But he rallied and was allowed to front for the 50 km walk in Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> November. The weather was expected to be hot and it lived up to expectations - the 1:30PM start saw blue skies and a strong sun.

The favourites were deemed to be Dolezal, Lavrov, Skroat, Ljunggren and Allsopp. However, the race was won by a walker who did not feature with the bookies. Norm Read had moved from England to New Zealand in 1954. As the Melbourne Olympics approached, he wrote to the British A.A.A. asking for permission to represent Great Britain as a walker. He was rejected. At first he was rejected in New Zealand as well, but a strong showing in races in Australia and New Zealand paved the way for him. On the day of the 50km race, Read got lost in the corridors of the stadium and didn't find his way to the track until the other walkers were already standing on the starting line. Maskinkov led over most of the course, with Read two and a half minutes back after 30 kilometres. At 42 kilometres, however, Read caught the tiring Soviet walker and pulled away to a decisive victory. His unexpected win caused wild cheering in the stadium, and a whole section of the New Zealand contingent had to be restrained from streaming onto the track. Again Ljunggren performed wonderfully in the heat to take the bronze to add a second Olympic medal to his collection.

1.	Norman READ	NZL	4:30:42.8
2.	Yevgeny MASKINSKOV	SOV	4:32:57.0
3.	<b>John LJUNGGREN</b>	<b>SWE</b>	<b>4:35:02.0</b>
4.	Abdon PAMICH	ITA	4:39:00.0
5.	Antal ROKA	HUN	4:50:09.0

The British Association Team Report on the 50 km walk read in part as follows

*The effects of the weather were visible in the final 10 kilometres, Klimov and Thompson, who collapsed completely at 42 kilometres when in fifth place, being among those who did not finish. Ljunggren finished strongly, making up three minutes on Maskinkov in the last five kilometres, but there was a big gap after Parmich had finished in fourth place, only six competitors completing the course inside five hours, a reflection of the exhausting conditions in which the race was held.*

Amazingly, he fronted 4 days later on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> November for the 20 km event, coming a strong fourth in 1:32:24. To have recovered so quickly from the effects of the gruelling 50 km event says a lot for his fitness and strength. In fact, he held second place at the 15 km mark but was just not able to hold off the Russians who stormed home. Again, to quote from the British Team Report for the 20 km event

*Ljunggren made a courageous effort to ward off the mass Soviet challenge and did magnificently, in view of his efforts in the longer race, to finish fourth, and the best stylist of the leading men,*



Left: Ljunggren in the pack soon after the start of the 1956 Olympic 20 km walk (photo from Ray Smith)  
 Right: Ljunggren crosses the Morrell St bridge on his way back to the Olympic Stadium in the 1956 Olympic 20 km event

His fourth Olympic foray, in 1960 in Italy, saw him again selected in both 20 km and 50 km events. The 20 km event was first and he walked well, finishing 7<sup>th</sup> in 1:37:59. But the 50 km event was his speciality and he was keen to do even better, especially since it was expected to be hot once again. He must have been pleased when he lined up for the start of the 50 km event on 7<sup>th</sup> September – it was in the heat of the afternoon with the temperature nudging 87°F.

After some mid-race disqualifications and with some other walkers fading in the oppressive conditions, English walker Don Thompson found himself in the lead at the half way mark. Ljunggren, two days shy of his 41<sup>st</sup> birthday, caught him by the 30 km mark and the two walked together for some time. At the 45 km mark, they were still side by side but, towards the end, Thompson gradually eased ahead and reached the stadium with a 20-second lead. He held on to become Britain's only track and field gold medallist at the 1960 Games. Ljunggren finished 17 seconds behind him to take silver with 4:25:47. It gave him the full set – a gold from 1948, a bronze from 1956 and now a silver in 1960.

1.	Don THOMPSON	GBR	4:25:30.0	OR
2.	John LJUNGGREN	SWE	4:25:47.0	
3.	Abdon PAMICH	ITA	4:27:55.4	
4.	Aleksandr STCHERBINA	SOV	4:31:44.0	
5.	Thomas MISSON	GBR	4:33:03.0	

Ljunggren completed his stellar Olympic career four year later in Tokyo at 45 years of age. However, the cold rainy conditions did not suit him and he finished well back, coming 16<sup>th</sup> in the 50 km event (4:29:09) and 19<sup>th</sup> in the 20 km event (1:37:03).

This marked the end of his international career which had extended from 1944 to 1964, a period of 20 years and included

- 6 world records
- 5 Olympic Games participations
- Olympic gold, silver and bronze medals
- European Championship gold and silver medals

The international competition results show that he was never disqualified and confirm that he was an excellent walking technician.

1946	European Championship	Stockholm	50 km	1 <sup>st</sup>	4:38:20
1948	Olympic Games	London	50 km	1 <sup>st</sup>	4:41:52
1950	European Championships	Bruxelles	50 km	2 <sup>nd</sup>	4:43:25
1952	Olympic Games	Helsinki	50 km	9 <sup>th</sup>	4:43:45
1954	European Champs	Bern	50 km	4 <sup>th</sup>	4:38:09
1954	European Champs	Bern	10000m	13 <sup>th</sup>	49:19
1956	Olympic Games	Melbourne	50 km	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4:35:02
1956	Olympic Games	Melbourne	20 km	4 <sup>th</sup>	1:32:24

1958	European Championships	Stockholm	50 km	9 <sup>th</sup>	4:52:40
1960	Olympic Games	Rome	50 km	2 <sup>nd</sup>	4:25:47
1960	Olympic Games	Rome	20 km	7 <sup>th</sup>	1:37:59
1961	Lugano Cup	Lugano	20 km	4 <sup>th</sup>	1:34:21
1962	European Championships	Belgrade	50 km	5 <sup>th</sup>	4:30:19
1963	Lugano Cup	Varese	20 km	7 <sup>th</sup>	1:35:53
1964	Olympics	Tokyo	50 km	16 <sup>th</sup>	4:29:09
1964	Olympics	Tokyo	20 km	19 <sup>th</sup>	1:37:03

I can find details of three of his six world records which read as follows

50 km track walk	4:32:52.0	Gislavad	29-07-51
30 km track walk	2:21:36.8	Varnamo	03-08-52
50 km track walk	4:29:58.0	Fristad	08-08-53

I found a Swedish site which quoted some huge statistics. During his Open walking career, he raced 543 times for 364 wins. He also competed in a further 103 events in other disciplines such as cycling and skiing. As a Veteran athlete, he continued competing between 1965 and 1992, winning gold in the 1977 World Veterans Championships and again in the 1982 European Championships. Throughout his entire career, he competed in an astounding 1,498 competitions! During the 60 years in which he trained, he accumulated a total distance of 28,000 km. The site also states that, throughout his school and work career, he never had a day off for illness.

He remains one of the walking greats and is, alongside the Russian Golubnichy, only one of two walkers to have walked at 5 successive Olympic Games.