

RIP Julian Hopkins 1944-2026 – innovative, outspoken and loved

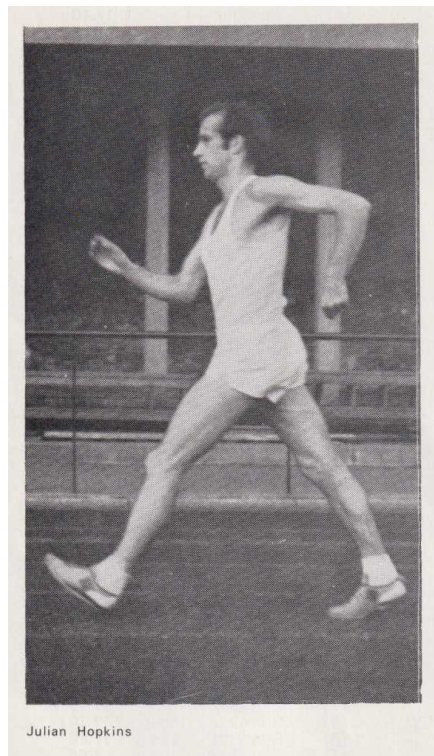
Posted on August 29, 2026 by Tony Taylor

<https://lancswalkingclub.com/2026/08/29/julian-hopkins-rip-innovative-outspoken-and-loved/>

I've put together this tribute to my dear friend, Julian Hopkins. It's not what might be seen as a proper obituary. I hope it doesn't fall between too many stools. The very act of writing and doing some limited research has made me determined to produce a much longer article detailing Julian's career. He deserves such a closer scrutiny of his hopes and fears. I believe he still has something to say that chimes with the state of race walking today. In doing so I will reveal my own misgivings about the impact of the 'straightened' as opposed to 'straightening' knee on the levels of participation in our sport across recent decades. Julian and I were nearly but not quite on the same page. Enough for now.

I would welcome comments and memories, which can be added to the ones to be found below. Please let me know if you would prefer your comment be deleted or replaced. I've pinched them from all over the place.

The arrangements for Julian's funeral are now in place. The service will take place on Tuesday 8th September at 11.30 a.m in the West Lancashire Crematorium, Pippin Street, Burscough L40 7SP. Afterwards there will be refreshments at Maghull Cricket Club, Tommy Gent Way, Hall Lane, Maghull L31 3DY. If anyone is interested in attending could they please email Vivienne Hopkins at viv.hopkins13@gmail.com or text/ WhatsApp on 07504081823.



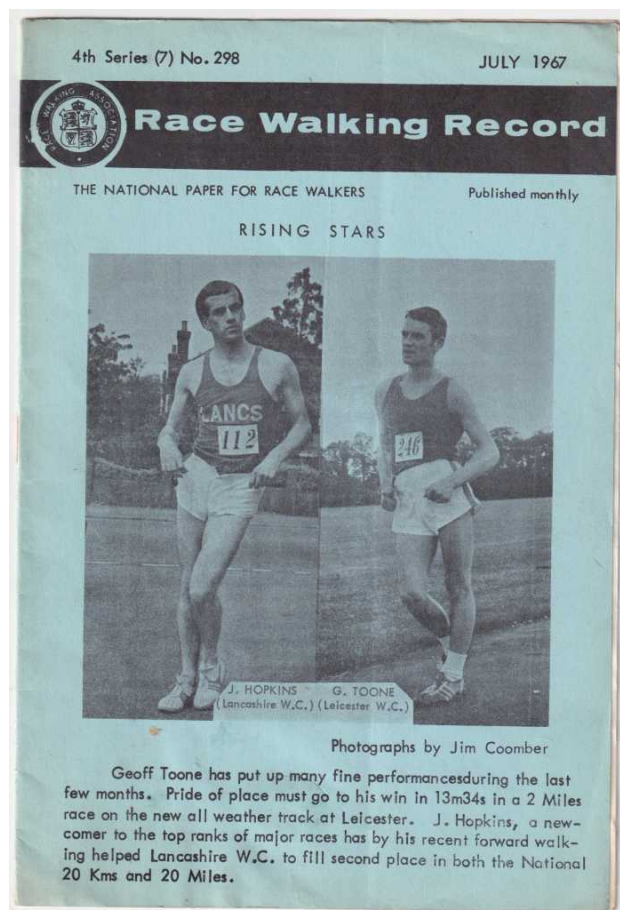
This action shot appeared in the book, 'Race Walking 71', which Julian and I co-authored and which was printed by Ron Wallwork

On Wednesday, August 12th 2026, race walking lost one of its most engaging and controversial characters, often laid back yet unapologetically outspoken. Julian Hopkins was a prominent athlete in his own right but made his name as an outstanding, meticulous and ultimately dissenting coach, who in Ron Wallwork's words was 'ahead of his time'.

Born on the 16th December 1944, in his school days he showed an interest in the sprints and long jump, lacking in truth the necessary number of fast-twitch fibres to be successful. Although his fascination with athletics in general was never to dim. He became a Liverpool Harrier in 1957. Then via a chance encounter in 1960 with Martin Trotman, a member of Surrey WC, he discovered the art of race walking, joined the Lancashire Walking Club, going on to study at Liverpool University. As the cliché goes, the rest is history.

Our paths first crossed in around 1961 at the Hindley Green Labour Club, nestling between Leigh and Wigan, at a Lancashire WC club race. This sort of venue was typical in its day, a working-class haven, where you changed in the Committee room and were welcomed home after your exertions with a large cup of sweet, milky tea, poured from large,

green cast iron kettles. Julian was showing promise. I was younger, shy and retiring, allowed to do only five of the ten miles event. His friendly overture on that day meant a lot. By 1967 'The Times They Were a-Changin'. Julian was teaching Maths/Physics and I was nearing the end of my teacher training. He had been featured on the cover of the Race Walking Record as 'a rising star', 'helping Lancashire Walking Club to second place team in the National 20 km and 20 miles championships'. Encouraged by Ron and Julian, I was to finish 6th in the National Junior 5 miles close behind Olympian Brian Adams, future European bronze medallist, Roger Mills and the ill-fated, mercurial talent, that was Phil Embleton. In the next few years Julian and I urged each other on.



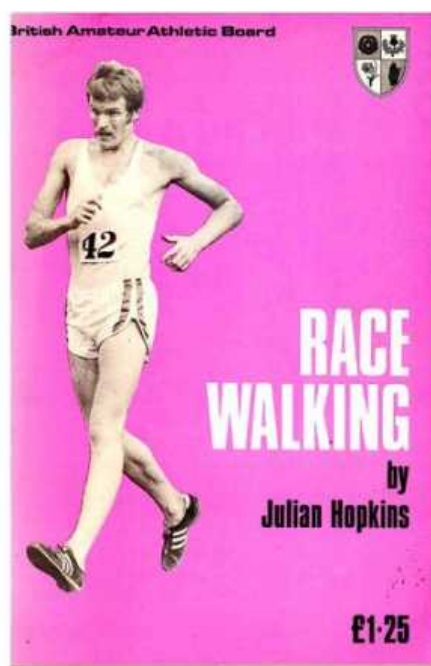
1968 was a pivotal moment in Julian's career. Recovering from the disappointment of not making the Mexico Olympics, Ron Wallwork energised the formation of a committed and enthusiastic club training group of mainly younger athletes, such as Steve Crow and Mick Entwistle or steeplechasers turned race walkers, such as Dave Vickers. We called ourselves 'Groupo Uno' and everything was possible. We experimented with all manner of training possibilities. We lifted weights and completed leg-trembling circuits, courtesy of a school caretaker, who entrusted us with the keys; we played with different intervals and recoveries on the track; we tried even-paced sessions on the road; we contorted ourselves in mobility sessions; and ran on the fells and on the track. In all of this, Julian was both a participant and a thoughtful observer of our exploits. Increasingly he took on a coaching role without ever being named as such, influencing up and coming talent such as Tony Malone and Chris Harvey. On the road he proved a crucial counter in the club's memorable successes of the period, notably winning the 1970 McSweeney Trophy awarded to the top team in the country and the 1971 National 20 kilometers title. Looking back, although he never used the now tarnished phrase, he sought to persuade us to 'follow the science'. However, being a good scientist he would not have meant the science rather the best science available at the time, which he was intent on discovering and providing.

In retrospect Group Uno constituted a laboratory of experience, out of which Julian Hopkins, the methodical and insightful coach emerged. Underpinning our efforts and parallel grass-roots initiatives across the country was a recognition that despite our historical standing we were falling behind internationally. This led in the early 1970s to the creation of the British Race Walking Club, committed to opening up international opportunities for our leading and promising athletes. Julian was in the vanguard of this development.



The 1974 Lugano Cup L/R Alec Banyard, Charlie Fogg, John Lees, Julian, Jake Warhurst, Roy Thorpe and Peter Marlow

In 1974 our dedicated student of the discipline was appointed to be the National Event coach, not without murmurs about his lack of international experience as a walker in his own right. Nevertheless the warmth of his personality, the depth of his knowledge and his pioneering enthusiasm won most people over to his side, not least within the Junior Squad he nurtured. Indeed, in 1976, he penned what is widely agreed to be one of the best, if not the best, in-depth introductions to the art and science of our sport. Yet he was to resign from his role in 1984. In his own words, he left because he could not accept the disqualification of technically proficient walkers for lack of contact. Thus his innovative decade as National coach has been overshadowed by the outcry over his heretical ideas regarding the definition of race walking. Indeed in some recollections his contribution to the sport has been given short shrift.



A closer interrogation of Julian's sojourn as National coach will have to wait another day. Such an undertaking will be worthwhile, not least because the issues he raised still haunt race walking. As an example, in 1993, Julian challenged the proposal that an electronic device capable of detecting loss of contact was the answer to the sport's contradictions. He worried that it could finish race walking as a competitive event. Over thirty years later, déjà vu, the search for the Holy Grail of a technological solution continues with microchips, able to measure the length of the aerial phase, being inserted into shoes. Julian's caution as to the consequences of such developments retains all its pertinence.

Whilst Julian was somewhat disillusioned following his departure from the establishment, he remained deeply in love with our sport. He kept in touch with wider contacts in Europe, the Americas and Australasia, all of whom held him in high regard. Back home he supported and advised such outstanding individuals as Mark Easton, Steve Barry, Ian McCombie, Oliver Flynn, Phil Vesty, Chris Maddocks, Murray Lambden, Marion Fawkes and Roger Mills, amongst many others. All remember him with respect and affection.

Slowly he did drift away from race walking, returning to his roots, to become secretary of the Merseyside Schools Athletic Association in the early 1990s. As you might expect, armed with a tannoy, he was a welcome and articulate announcer across the region's activities over the next two decades. Revealingly, in a profile on the Liverpool Harriers web site from 2011, he wondered whether his years spent trying to modernise the coaching of our discipline were wasted. He pondered whether he should just have focused on being the best race walker he could be. In hindsight his regret is in part understandable. However his misgiving does a grave disservice to his cutting-edge work as a coach and to the impact he had on so many men and women, young and old in our sport. Above all, he was a genuine, compassionate soul, an expert in his role, who could always stand his ground when he thought it mattered.



2016 sees Julian with Eric Crompton, Mick Entwistle, Fred Pearce, Ron Wallwork and myself celebrating Ron's UK 2 Hour record set in 1971

To end with a few anecdotes about Julian, my dear friend and training partner of yore, to whom I owe so much.

- In the early 1970s, when he often stayed over at our house for the weekend, the Sunday morning 'stroll' was obligatory, around three hours. Being lovers of classical music, to pass the time, we would hum passages from the symphonies or concertos and challenge each other to name the work in question. Heaven knows what people thought as we passed them by! And, by the way, his favourite piece, was the second movement of Beethoven's violin concerto.
- In 1985, just after his resignation, we met for a meal on the Isle of Man, where he was always welcomed warmly by its vibrant race walking community. The Lugano Cup finals were taking place. He shared his frustration about the previous decade as national coach. Yet all such angst was tempered by the fact that he had been disqualified earlier in the Open 10 kilometres event held alongside the major championship. DQed for bent knees! To his eternal credit he accepted the inevitable banter with good grace and a knowing smile.



Old-Timers Reunited L/R Standing Dave Grindley, Dave Vickers, Ron Wallwork. Tony Malone, Eric Crompton. Tony Taylor, David Lamb and Chris Harvey L/R Sitting Mick Entwistle, Guy Goodair and Julian Hopkins, bloodied but not bowed, still recovering his wits!

- In 2023, nigh on four decades later, Julian happily agreed to attend a special anniversary Lancashire Walking Club race, the Fred Pearce relay. However, given he still didn't drive, I had to pick him up at a railway station. From the moment he climbed into the car, time didn't stand still, it reversed rapidly. It was as if we were back in 1985 or even 1967. So much so that he decided to compete, so many years on! It didn't go well. Imagine our concern as he appeared at the finish, courtesy of a passing car, bleeding and embarrassed. He'd tripped over and bashed his head. Bloodied, but unbowed, within minutes he was in animated, eager conversation with anyone within his reach. Present were a few of us from the 1968 Group Uno, Ron Wallwork, Mick Entwistle, Dave Vickers and myself. Observing his still boundless, infectious enthusiasm reminded us vividly of being together on the moors above Bolton, striving to be the best we could be. Julian was the last person to leave the village hall that day, still keen to explore afresh his love for this extraordinary, humbling activity called race walking. I found myself near to tears, reflecting how much the sport missed him and how much he missed the sport.



Ian McCombie and Julian at pre-Olympic camp in 1984. Thanks to Chris Maddocks for the photo.

Fourteen months after this nostalgic reunion, Julian suffered a dramatic stroke from which he never fully recovered. I know he was overwhelmed by the messages of concern, conveyed to him from across the race walking world.

Thanks, Julian for the memories, both ordinary and exceptional. You will indeed be missed.

Tony Taylor