

## KEN MATTHEWS: 1934-2019

The world's racewalking community was saddened in June 2019 to hear of the passing of Ken Matthews, Great Britain's last surviving Olympic race walking Gold medallist. His death occurred on the evening of Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June in Wrexham where he was a hospital in-patient.

Kenneth ("Ken") Joseph Matthews was born on 21 June 1934 in Birmingham and started his race walk career as an 18-year-old, following in the footsteps of his father, Joe, who was a founding member of the now defunct Royal Sutton Coldfield Walking Club. Throughout his athletics career, Ken remained Midlands based, and remained a loyal member of Royal Sutton Coldfield Walking Club.

An electrical maintenance engineer at a power station near his hometown of Sutton Coldfield, he became one of England's most successful ever racewalkers and dominated the world stage throughout the early 1960's. He won 17 national titles, as well as Olympic and European gold and, between 1964 to 1971 he held every British record from 5 miles to 2 hours, including a 10-mile world best of 69:40.6.

Perhaps surprisingly, he did not dominate as a youngster and it was not until 1959, at age 25, that he won his first British titles – the RWA's 10 miles road title and the AAA's 2 miles and 7 miles track titles. <sup>1</sup> From then on, he was pretty much unbeatable in England, but the British race most people remember is, interestingly, a loss rather than a victory.

In spectacle, excitement and sheer athleticism, the 1960 AAA 2 mile duel between Stan Vickers and Ken stands comparison with any of the great races in the history of the championships. Scrupulously fair, yet at the fastest pace ever seen in Britain, the two kept within a yard or so of each other, Ken leading until the bell, when Vickers powered past to cut 9 sec from George Lerner's 56-year-old record, with 13:02.4, and Ken 13:09.6, also inside the old figures. <sup>2</sup>



*Vickers beats Matthews in the 1960 AAA 2 Mile Championship*

That same year, Ken modernised the championship best for 7 miles with a breakthrough winning time of 49:42.6.

Expectations soared for the 1960 Olympic Games with Vickers already European champion over 20 km (1958) and still improving, and Matthews even faster. But Ken, weakened by a recent bout of flu, wilted in the Rome sun. Vickers, concerned about his team-mate, eased his pace, until Matthews, who was shortly after taken to hospital, urged him on. Vickers finished in the bronze medal position, less than a minute down on the winner.

<sup>1</sup> Luckily, although the 10,000m walk had been taken off the Olympic program after 1952, track walks remained on the AAA championship schedule and served as a useful speed test for road walkers and brought their skills before a public who would not otherwise see them.

<sup>2</sup> Much of the information in this article is taken from *The Official Centenary of the AAA* by Peter Lovesy, 1979

Ken consigned his first Olympic disappointment to experience and prepared for the next Games. In 1961, he won the Lugano Cup 20 km event, in 1962 he won the European 20 km title and in 1963 he won the Lugano Cup 20 km again, thereby becoming the unbackable favourite for 1964 Olympic Gold. He was also unbeatable on the local English front and by 1964, he had raised his tally of AAA titles to ten.

Recently, Ken told Mark Wall an interesting story about his Tokyo Olympic preparation. The Electricity board gave him Wednesday afternoons off to train but he found it a waste of time after a few weeks so went back to working a full week. It was indeed still the day of the amateur sportman!

In the 1964 Olympics, he felt he would win only if his wife, Sheila, could join him in Tokyo. His mates agreed and collected £742 to send her along. Sure enough, he took the lead after 5 km and was never headed, crossing the finish line far ahead of the others. As he approached the finish, the 2<sup>nd</sup> man, Dietner Lindner of Germany, was just entering the Stadium. Ken clocked 1.29.34.0 and Lindner 1.31.13.2, both inside the previous Olympic record.

In an unforgettable Olympic moment, his wife Sheila broke through stadium security, rushed onto the track, and gave her husband what was probably the longest victory kiss in Olympic history. At the post race interview, Ken said, "*My legs hurt me at the end of the race. They still do. But I wouldn't mind going dancing now.*"

Golubnichiy, although still the world record holder, could not match Matthews and faded to third, his second Olympic medal. Sixth place finisher Ron Zinn died in the Vietnam War less than nine months later. He was 26 years old. 3 Australians competed in the event with Noel Freeman finishing just outside the medals in 4<sup>th</sup> place.



*Ken Matthews powers down the final straight to victory in Tokyo*



*and was then embraced by his wife in a moment that was captured for posterity*

Youtube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufCgNZF4xdY> , put out by team GB, zooms in on Ken's 1964 Olympic victory.

### 1964 Olympic 20km Walk

1.	Ken MATTHEWS	GBR	1:29:34.0	OR
2.	Dieter LINDNER	GDR	1:31:13.2	
3.	Vladimir GOLUBNICHY	SOV	1:31:59.4	
4.	<b>Noel FREEMAN</b>	<b>AUS</b>	<b>1:32:06.8</b>	
5.	Gennady SOLODOV	SOV	1:32:33.0	
6.	Ronald ZINN	USA	1:32:43.0	
7.	Boris KHROLOVICH	SOV	1:32:45.4	
8.	John EDGINGTON	GBR	1:32:46.0	
22.	<b>Ron CRAWFORD</b>	<b>AUS</b>	<b>1:38:47</b>	
	<b>Robert GARDINER</b>	<b>AUS</b>	<b>DNF</b>	

Ken was one of four British athletes who won Gold in these Games.<sup>3</sup> In the Queen's Honours' List after these Games, three were awarded MBEs and one (Ken Matthews) got nothing! No reason was ever forthcoming and this oversight was not rectified until 1977, when a public campaign, led by the Race Walking Association, to honour the forgotten one attracted National attention. As a result, Ken finally "took a walk to the Palace" to get his MBE, 13 years after the other three!

Ken held the unofficial world best for 5 miles (34min. 21.2sec.) and 10 miles plus every U.K. record from 5 miles to two hours. Every year from 1959 to 1964 he won the RWA's 10 miles road title and in 1959, 1961, 1963 and 1964 won both the AAA's 2 miles and 7 miles track titles. There were no other titles he could win because the Commonwealth Games did not feature race walking at that time.

Ken lived in Wrexham in later life. He had long since packed up his walking shoes but was still an enthusiastic cyclist at 70 years of age when interviewed on the occasion of the 2000 Olympic Games. He appeared regularly at Midlands walking events and the Ken Matthews trophy is awarded to the highest point scoring Midlands team in the RWA titles.

Ken was inducted into the England Athletics Hall of Fame in 2011 and was President of the Race Walking Association in the London 2012 Olympic year.



*Ken in 2012 (photo by Mark Shearman)*

He is remembered by the British racewalking community as a true gentleman and an extremely modest man, despite his many stellar achievements.

<sup>3</sup> The other three 1964 British Gold Medallists were Lynn Davies (men's long jump), Mary Rand (women's long jump) and Ann Packer (women's 800m)

Some years ago, former Guernsey walker Len Duquemin gave me a newspaper article, dated Monday 8 June 1964, about one of Ken Matthew's many memorable races. It tells the story of one of his most famous record breaking walks in the leadup to the 1964 Olympic Games.

### **Britain's No. 1 Pedestrian**

#### **If you think you can beat him to the bus, look at these figures**

Seven Miles in 48:22.2 (British and Empire Records)

Eight Miles 1,151 yards in an hour (British and Empire Records)

Ten Miles in 1:09:40.6 (British and Empire Records)

20 Kilometres in 1:28:45.8 (British and Empire Records)

15 Miles in 1:52:14.4 (British National Record)

15 Miles 1,556 yards 1 foot in two hours (British and Empire Records)

Ken Matthews is a pedestrian who moves so fast you feel he ought to put money in a parking meter when he does stand still.

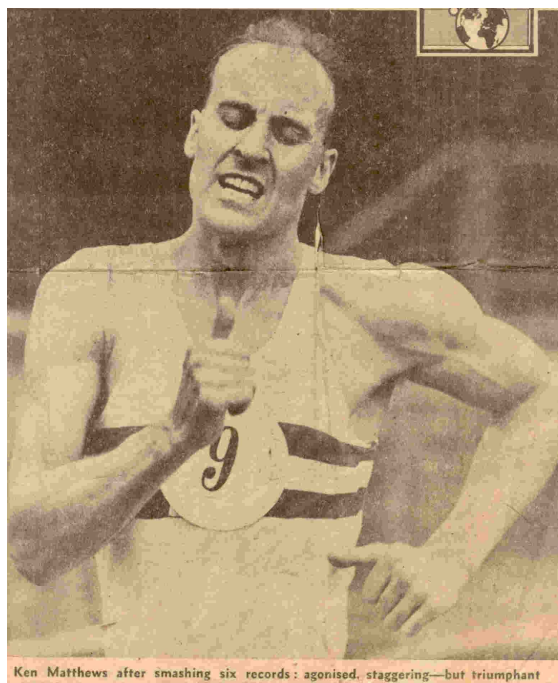
At the weekend he walked his way through six records : seven miles, 1 hour, ten miles, 20 km, 15 miles and 2 hours.

Round the track at Walton-on-Thames he first skimmed then plugged along, finally staggered.

But by the end of it, he confirmed that he is Britain's outstanding Olympic gold medal challenger for Tokyo.

Two of the records he broke had stood in Britain for 50 years.

Yet after it all, Matthews confessed he was disappointed. "I was aiming for the world record at 20 kilometres, but a few laps from it, my legs went. On the 47<sup>th</sup> lap he staggered and appeared ready to collapse. His wife Shiela ran to the centre of the stadium and, running alongside – that's the only way to keep up with Matthews when he's walking – asked if he was all right. Another competitor, Enfield policeman Charlie Fogg, drew alongside Matthews and from there to the end, pleaded with him to keep going. And Matthews did. At the end Matthews, a 29 year old electrical maintenance man from Sutton Coldfield, had lost 5lb. From his 6ft. 1in. Frame.



Ken Matthews after smashing six records: agonised, staggering—but triumphant