

A chapter in racewalking history was closed a week ago with the death of British Olympic walker **Lawrence Allen**. Dave Ainsworth has put out the following brief obituary.

Lawrence ‘Lol’ ALLEN (GBR) (b. 25 Apr 1921 Sheffield) died on December 16 in Sheffield at the age of 97. A member of Sheffield United Harriers, he had a great race walk rivalry with Roland Hardy in the early 1950s. Unfortunately he was disqualified in his two 10,000m internationals – at the 1952 Olympic Games and at the 1950 Europeans (after finishing in 2nd place). He was RWA champion at both 10 miles and 20 miles 1949-51 and 1958, while at the AAAs he was 2nd at 7 miles each year 1950-52 and 3rd at 2 and 7 miles in 1949. Walk PBs: 2M 13:43.4 (1950), 5M 35:40.8 (1950), 10000m 44:32.8 (1950), 7M 50:22.6 (1950), 10M 1:11:35 (1954), 20M 2:48:48/2:41:40 short (1954). He also won various Northern and CAU titles between 1949 and 1961.

But there is a lot more to the story than this bare bones account.

Controversy over style, ever a troubling issue, had come to a crisis in the 1950s, a crisis that virtually ended international track walking, with Lawrence Allen and Roland Hardy caught in the middle. Luckily, for us, most of that story was captured by Peter Lovesey in his book *The Official Centenary History of the Amateur Athletic Association*.

The two Sheffield walkers had been selected as part of the British team for the 1950 European Championships in Brussels, after dominant performances on the local front (Hardy had won the AAA 2 and 7 miles in outstanding times and Allen was the RWA 10 and 20 miles champion). Indeed, they went in as strong prospects for medals. This they confirmed by establishing such a lead in the 10,000m European Championships walk that it seemed they would not be caught. However, an old campaigner by the name of Fritz Schwab (the son of Switzerland’s Arthur Schwab, who won the 50km silver medal in 1936), raised what might charitably be termed a dashing finish and reached the line first in a time of 46:01. When it was announced that the result had been referred to the Jury of Appeal, justice seemed about to be done. Yet to general amazement, Schwab's victory was confirmed, and Hardy and Allen disqualified! The British team manager, Jack Crump, described it as *'the most atrociously unfair occurrence which I have ever known in more than twenty years of first-class athletics'*. In the protracted debate that followed, it was argued that the human eye was incapable of telling whether an 8 mph walker was 'lifting'. Films and photographs were studied minutely; even Bobby Bridge from pre-World War I days had his reputation dented by the evidence.

Back home after this debacle, Hardy and Allen had no trouble satisfying the English judges, Hardy reducing the AAA 2 miles best to 13:27.8 and the 7 miles to 50:05.6. They went to the 1952 Olympic Games, once again, as favourites for the 10,000m walk.

Come the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, two heats were used to decide who of the 23 entrants would make the 10,000m walk final. Bruno Junk of U.S.S.R, who was the fastest qualifier, won the first heat in 45:05, 5 seconds ahead of John Mikaelsson, the defending champion. His Swedish compatriot Verner Hardmo still held the World Record at 42:39.6 but had now retired. Coleman of GBR won the second heat in a slower 46:12. But Hardy and Allen again incurred the displeasure of the judges, with Hardy one of 3 walkers disqualified in the first heat and Allen one of two walkers disqualified in the second heat.

The final saw the 38 year old Mikaelsson win by over 100 yards in a new Olympic record time of 45:02.8 in impeccably fair style. But the final is better remembered for the tussle to decide the minor medals. Schwab, chasing second place, produced another of his fleet-footed finishes, travelling at such speed that the Chief Judge had to run hard beside him to observe his style. Junk manfully met the challenge, and the pair sprinted to a photo-finish which palpably showed both men running. Yet there was no disqualification.

The judges, who had disqualified seven men in the heats and final, were made to look foolish. The Official British Olympic Association Report for the 1952 Olympic Games was scathing

Once again, this race proved by far the most unsatisfactory of all the Olympic athletic events. Including the chief judge, G. Oberweger of Italy, there were nine judges, each from a different country. The standard of judging and the basis on which decisions were made to caution or disqualify competitors were made, was neither consistent nor impartial, and in both the heats and the final even the most knowledgeable of followers of walking found it bewildering to appreciate what was happening.

The controversies that resulted from this incident ridden event led Olympic officials to drop the 10,000m walk and replace it with a 20km walk in 1956. From 1956 onwards, only longer road walks would be contested at major championships.

For Lawrence Allen, this was the last roll of the dice and his last international representation. Hardy, however, showed commendable resilience, continuing on and competing in the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, here he finished 8th in the 20km with a time of 1:34:40.4.

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