

Thanks to Paul Nihill for his scrutiny of the draft version of this short biography and for his amendments and suggestions. Paul wishes to dedicate the article in memory of his mother.

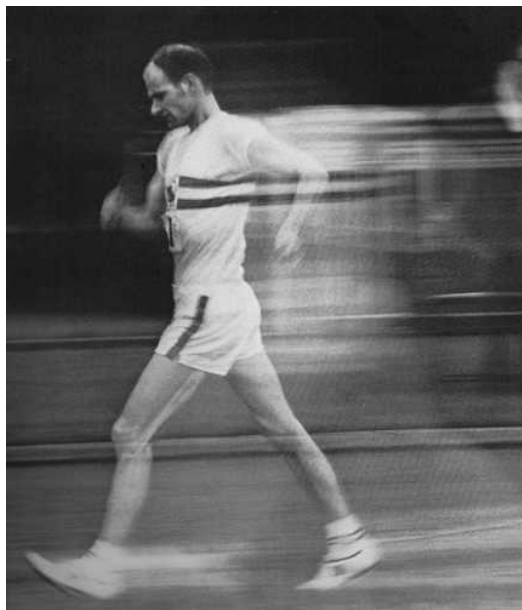
Consider England's racewalking dominance in the early 1960s.

- 1960 Don Thompson wins the 1960 Olympic 50km and Stan Vickers finishes 3rd in the Olympic 20km.
- 1961 Ken Matthews wins the inaugural 1961 Lugano Cup 20km and George Williams is third, while Don Thompson takes silver in the 50km. GBR wins the teams event.
- 1962 Ken Matthews wins the European Championships 20km and Don Thompson takes bronze in the 50km.
- 1963 Ken Matthews wins and Paul Nihill is second in the 1963 Lugano Cup 20km and Ray Middleton takes silver in the 50km. GBR wins the team event, with three 20km walkers finishing in the top 6 and three 50km walkers finishing in the top 6.
- 1964 Ken Matthews wins the Olympic 20km and Paul Nihill takes silver in Olympic 50km.

I have written previously on Don Thompson¹ and Ken Matthews². It is now time to zoom in on the third of these outstanding walkers, namely Paul Nihill.

Less spirited in style than Thompson, less machine like than Matthews, Nihill brought to British walking an astonishing versatility and resilience that now sees him regarded as perhaps their greatest ever walker.

He enjoyed an outstanding, record-breaking career. Between 1967 and 1970, he won 85 of his 86 walking races, his only defeat coming in the Olympic 50km at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, when in the thin air of the high altitude, he pushed himself to a standstill, collapsing within a few miles of the finish. Nihill then concentrated on the 20km distance, becoming European champion in 1969, winning a European bronze medal in 1971 and setting a world record in 1972. His career included 4 Olympic Games (1964, 1968, 1972 and 1976), the first male British athlete ever to achieve this feat.



Paul Nihill pictured at speed in the 1971 AAA 10,000m (photo ED Lacey)³

The starting place for any article on Paul Nihill is the wonderful 2006 extended audio interview recorded as part of the British Library Sound Archive⁴. It is just over 3 hours in length and I listened to it all as part of the process of writing this document.

And now onto the facts and figures.

- 1 See <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wo-don-thompson.pdf>
- 2 See <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wo-ken-matthews.pdf>
- 3 The Official Centenary History of the AAA by Peter Lovesey p 143
- 4 See <https://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Sport/021M-C0790X0037XX-0100V0>

For most sporting stars, their life makes for easy reading. They generally come from a stable family background and have lots of support as they progress through the ranks. Nothing could be further from the truth in the case of Paul Nihill.

Vincent Paul Nihill was born 5th Sept 1939, 2 days after the outbreak of WWII.

Nihill's early life was tumultuous. He was placed in an orphanage in Chelmsford at 2 years of age as his family disintegrated around him. He was eventually reunited with his mother in Croydon but family life continued to be fraught with difficulties. His family was poor and they struggled for money. Further, he had a poor but stable relationship with his stepfather and spent much time roaming throughout London rather than being at home.

Eventually, at 9 years of age, he was sent back into care in a Catholic convent school in Littlehampton. Although only there for 6 months, he suffered physical and psychological abuse, an experience that he admits left him scarred for life. His mother fought in the courts to regain custody and he was returned to her on his 10th birthday. Finally some normality returned to his life.

He was sent to the Woodside School in Addiscombe, Croydon, and it was there that he discovered his love for sport. He joined the local boys club and boxed and ran and played football and cricket. Slightly built, he boxed at 6st 7lbs as a 14 year old (he was a late developer and did his growing once he left school at age 15).

He loved boxing more than athletics but he could see that he was better at athletics. For a while he combined the two sports competitively but eventually running took over. A critical point was reached when the boys club coach encouraged him to move to cross country from the sprints. He instantly took to it.

His school career was all too short and he left, aged 15. His first job was as an office boy in a wholesale grocery, where he stayed for 18 months. It was during this time that he had his first racewalk. He was just 17 when he saw an athletics club advertisement in the paper which read "Can you walk 5 miles in an hour?" He duly participated, coming second to famous London to Brighton runner Charlie Busby (Blackheath Harriers), then aged 48. From then on, he was mixing running and boxing and walking.

While his sporting endeavours were flourishing, not much else was. In fact, he was pushed out of home at age 17, after further friction with his stepfather. Finding himself now homeless and with no support network of friends or family, he joined the Army as a regular. It was a decision based on sheer desperation. Alas, he could not cope with the army way of life and ran away within a week. Although he had signed on for 7 years, he was allowed to officially leave after only forty days, after taking an overdose of tablets. He had attempted to kill himself as a means of release from his army commitment. This was an indication of his precarious mental health at that time.

In 1958, he found lodgings in South Norwood and finally settled, staying there for the next 7 to 8 years, sourcing a job with Corona, a soft drinks firm, and eventually marrying and fathering a family of three children, Tony, Clare and Vincent.

He had a lot of knee trouble in his late teens and in 1959, aged 19, the doctors identified a chipped bone within the knee. Eventually he had his patella removed, a serious operation that took many months to recover. He found he could no longer box or run without pain, so walking now took precedence. Within 4 years he was an international walker.

He joined the Surrey Walking Club and threw himself into training. He was a loner who trained morning and night, with long walks thrown in on the weekend, covering many miles a week.

Tall (at 1.8m) and lean (a light framed 66kg), he was a versatile all rounder with an abundance of speed and stamina. Equally good at both track and road, he eventually excelled and set records in all distances from 1 Mile (6m 17s) to 50km.

Over the years, he worked for a number of big companies, including GEC, British Rail and Lloyds Bank. He was generally well supported by these companies and granted additional time to train and take time off for major races. But for now that's all further down the track.

By February 1961, he was mentioned in the Race Walking Record for his 2nd place in the Southern "Garnett" 10 Miles Championship at Brighton (81:13) behind Surrey teammate Maurice Fullager.

A year later, in March 1962, he had started to make his mark nationally, taking 4th in the London Counties 10 Miler (77:17) and 5th place in the 10 Miles National Championship (79:09), one place behind Don Thompson and one place ahead of Ray Middleton). He followed this up with third in the 20 Miles National Championship (2:46:13) behind

Matthews and Thompson. He then went into longer distance mode with 9th in the National 50km (4:51:32 and a Surrey Walking Club teams win), 4th in the Birmingham Outer Circle 25 Miler (3:48:44) and 9th in the Hastings to Brighton 38 Miler (6:13:32). The only race he did not seem to do was the London to Brighton! His season finished with appearances in the various 7 Mile classics, gaining places in them all. Ken Matthews was still the dominant walker but Nihill was now one of the young hopefuls nipping at his heels.

If 1962 was a promise of things to come, 1963 saw the fulfilment of that promise. Consider his major races for that year, leading up to his first Lugano Trophy appearance in October:

Feb: 1st in the London Counties 10 Miles Championship (75:07) and the Counties 10 Miles Championship (74:10)
Mar: 2nd to Ken Matthews in the National 10 Miles Championship (73:20 to 73:34)
Apr: 1st in the Metropolitan W.C. Open 20 km (1:32:09)
May: 1st in the National 20 Miles Championship (2:39:43)
June: 4th in the National 50km (4:26:06), followed a week later by 1st in the Southern Area AAA 2 Miles Walk (13:43.6)
Aug: 2nd to Italian Abdon Pamich in the London Vidarians 25 Miler (3:23:00)
Sept: 3rd in the France vs GB 20km match (1:35:04), followed a week later by 1st in the Highgate Harriers One Hour Walk (8m 462 yd)

He was disappointed when he was not invited to walk with Matthews in the 1963 Milan 30km but amends were made when he was named as part of the British team to contest the Lugano Trophy in Varese, Italy. That weekend of 12-13 October 1963 now stands as perhaps the greatest weekend in British racewalking history, with the British team surpassing all expectations in this, the second Lugano Trophy meet. Every member of the team finished in the first 6: Middleton 2nd, Wallwork 5th and Fogg 6th in the 50km and Matthews 1st, Nihill 2nd and Edgington 6th in the 20km. The 20km results showed a close race, but one in which Matthews was not really challenged for gold and Nihill was not really challenged for silver.

1963 Lugano Trophy 20km, Varese, Italy, 13th October

1.	Ken Matthews	GBR	1:30:11
2.	Paul Nihill	GBR	1:33:19
3.	Antál Kiss	HUN	1:33:38

1964 now loomed large as the Olympic year and Nihill weighted his options. If he contested the Olympic 20km, the best he could do was second. No one was going to beat Ken Matthews! So he chose to contest the Olympic 50km. Don Thompson was in the twilight of his career and Nihill was now beating him regularly. The 50km landscape certainly looked clearer. He got to work.

He was second in the National 10 Miles (72:03) in March, won the Metropolitan W.C. 20km (91:39) in April, won the R.W.A 20 Miler (2:40:13) in May and won the National 50km in June (4:17:10).

It was no surprise when he was named as the British number 1 walker in their Olympic 50km team. He was clearly amongst the Olympic favourites and was broadly picked to medal behind the clear favourite, Italian Abdon Pamich.

Race conditions on the day were perfect from Nihill's perspective. The hot and humid Tokyo summer conditions gave way to a wet and cool day, just like home! Pamich lead early with Agapov (Russia) but broke clear at the 15km mark. Soon he was joined by Nihill and Hohne (Germany). The German quickly fell back and it was left to Pamich and Nihill to fight it out. Near the 38km mark, Pamich was forced to stop with stomach problems but Nihill's time in the lead was short and, by 40km, Pamich was 4 secs in front. Nihill chased the Italian through the final 10km but could not bridge the gap, eventually finishing 19 seconds behind in second place.

Both Pamich and Nihill had broken the current world record. Further, the first 12 to finish had bettered the current Olympic record. Retrospectively, Nihill regarded his 1964 Olympic silver medal as his greatest ever performance.

1964 Olympic 50km Walk, Tokyo, Japan, 1st July

1.	Abdon Pamich	ITA	4:11:12.4
2.	Paul Nihill	GBR	4:11:31.2
3.	Ingvar Pettersson	SWE	4:14:17.4



Paul Nihill (right) relishes the wet conditions in the 1964 Olympic 50km championship (photo Getty Images)

1965 saw Nihill continue on his winning ways, talking golds in the AAA 2 miles and 7 miles championships, along with wins in the RWA 10 miles and 20 miles and 20km.

1966 continued in much the same mode, but all was not right. Eventually, trying to find a balance between his career as an athlete, his ongoing financial problems and the pressures of a young family, it became too much and he suffered a serious breakdown in health. He was forced to take time off work, he stopped racing and he withdrew from life in general.

The buildup to this was hidden from the public and it was a surprise to the local walking community when the following was published in the September 1966 issue of the Race Walking Record (No 288).

PAUL NIHILL RETIRES

During the month of August, Paul Nihill, the Olympic 50km silver medallist, announced his retirement from racewalking. This announcement came after Paul had been selected to represent Gt. Britain over 20 kms at the European Games. Despite Paul's reported annoyance with the selectors, R.W.A. officials and walkers in general, we find it difficult to understand why he should choose to retire a couple of weeks before the Games. Generally, selected competitors retire afterwards. During 1965, he set standards which future walkers will find extremely difficult to equal, never mind surpass, when he won all the major A.A.A and R.W.A. National titles except the 50km.

Not exactly a sympathetic hearing!

He continued to train as much as he could but it was some time before he could face the starter's gun again. Yet, by 1968 he was back as the foremost British walker, winning all the major championships from 7 miles to 50km. His time the R.W.A 10 Miler in April (72:28) indicated he was getting back into top form.

Again, he had to decide whether to nominate for the 1968 Olympic 20km or 50km as he had clearly qualified for both. He eventually chose the longer distance as he thought it would be the safer option in the high altitude of Mexico City. The discussions had centred on the dangers in particular in the middle distance events.

Yet it proved to be the wrong decision, as the Olympic 50km was walked in oppressive heat, and heat was the one thing that Nihill at that time found difficult.

He led the Olympic 50km field out of the stadium, confident in his preparation and feeling he was ready to win. Just as in 1964, the race developed into a two person duel, with him alone in the lead with Christoph Hohne (East Germany) by the half way mark. But things quickly fell apart soon after, with Nihill falling back and eventually collapsing around the 45km mark, while in 11th place. It was Nihill's only defeat for the year.

Writing in the Race Walking Record, Ken Best said "*It was unfortunate that this greatest of all sporting events was marred by controversy over altitude.*"

Nihill bounced back in 1969 in the best possible way, winning the first 3 British championships, passing the landmark of 50 consecutive wins in England, setting UK records at 5000m (20:14.2) and 3000m (11:51.2) and setting five other records at championship level.

He was rewarded with vests for two upcoming international meets. The first of the two was held in Brno on the morning of July 6th in humid conditions, over 16 laps of a concrete circuit. Nihill broke clear on the seventh lap, going on to win by over 4 minutes.

Czechoslovakia v Great Britain, Brno, Czechoslovakia, 6th July 1969

1.	Paul Nihill	GBR	1:31:22.2
2.	Peter Fullager	GBR	1:35:30.6
3.	Alexander Bilek	CZE	1:37:20.6

The second meet was a three way contest in Los Angeles 2 weeks later. This was the race he regarded as his greatest ever non-championship performance, defeating Olympic 20km champion Vladimir Golubnichy and Olympic bronze medallist Nikolai Smaga, both representing the USSR.

USA v COMMONWEALTH v USSR, Los Angeles, USA, 19th July 1969

1.	Paul Nihill	GBR	1:31:49.8
2.	Vladimir Golubnichy	USSR	1:32:11.0
3.	Ron Laird	USA	1:32:27.0
4.	Nikolai Smaga	USA	1:32:51.4
5.	Frank Clark	AUS	1:33:14.6
6.	Robert Kitchen	USA	1:38:02.4

It was no real surprise when he backed up with a win in the European Championships 20km in Athens in September.

1969 European Championships, Athens, Greece, 24th September 1971

1.	Paul Nihill	GBR	1:30:48
2.	Leonida Caraiosifoglu	ROM	1:31:06
3.	Nikolay Smaga	USSR	1:31:20

Ominously, Russians finished in 3rd and 7th places and East Germans finished in 4th and 5th places in this race. This period marked the start of the modern doping era and the high placings from these two countries sent an ominous warning.



*1969 Sward Trophy Meet at the Crystal Palace in London – Paul Nihill wins the men's track walk
(photo mediastore warehouse)*

He was a worthy recipient of the 1969 UK athlete of the year.

1970 was another spectacular year for Nihill, achieving world bests at 3000m and 10 miles and winning national titles at 3km, 20km, 20 miles and 50km. But awful news awaited him. His wife had contracted hepatitis and, even though he took all precautions, he too came down with the disease. It was shattering. He had been the firm favourite for the 1970 Commonwealth Games which were to be contested in Edinburgh in July. He now had to bypass the opportunity.

Retrospectively, he felt he was never the quite the same walker afterwards. But he did gradually recover and was well enough to join the team for the 1970 Lugano Trophy meet in Eschborn, Germany, later that year. There he finished a lowly (by his standards) 15th place with 1:33:10, the second of the British walkers, behind Ron Wallwork, who was 10th with 1:31:36.

By late 1971, he was back on song and was named in the team for the 1971 European Championships, contesting the 20km in Helsinki. His 3rd place finish was a personal best 1:27:43.8 and broke Ken Matthews' British record. Of the first 8 placings, Nihill (3rd) and Embleton (6th) were the only non Eastern Bloc walkers.

European Championships, Helsinki, Finland, 10th August 1971

1.	Nikolay Smaga	USSR	1:27:20.2
2.	Gerhard Sperling	East Ger	1:27:29.0
3.	Paul Nihill	GBR	1:27:34.8

In the leadup to the 1972 Olympics, Nihill was chasing both 20km and 50km performances, perhaps eyeing the double at the Olympics.

He travelled to East Germany, for the 1972 May Day (1st May) walk meet in Berlin, choosing the 50km option. After leading at half way with a very fast 2:00:43, he looked set for a very quick time. Yet 500m later, he blew, struggling to finish the 20 lap course in 6th place with 4:30:12, after taking 66 minutes for the last 10km. As the Race Walking Record reported: "*Even Paul Nihill is human and can take a hammering*".

Two weeks later, he won the R.W.A. National 20km championship in a convincing 1:28:45, a superb 5 minute win on a tough course. This locked in his Olympic 20km spot.

Two months later, he raced his fastest ever 20km on the Isle of Man, winning with a World Record time of 1:24:50, breaking the two month old record of 1:25:19, held by Gennadiy Agapov of Russia. This World Record would stand for 4 years until bettered by Daniel Bautista in 1976. It would stand as the British record until 1983 when Steve Barry bettered it with 1:22:51.

20km World Record Progression ⁵

1:25:19	Gennadiy Agapov	URS	1972-05-07	Berlin, Germany
1:24:50	Paul Nihill	GBR	1972-07-30	Isle of Man
1:23:40	Daniel Bautista	MEX	1976-05-30	Bydgoszcz, Poland

He was duly named for the 20km / 50k double for the Munich Olympics, and went into the 20km race as the current World Record holder and clear favourite. But it was not to be. While leading around the half way mark, he experienced severe thigh pain and could only limp home for 6th place with 1:28:44.

⁵ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Men%27s_20_kilometres_walk_world_record_progression



*1972 Olympic 20km - Bernd Kannenberg, Nikolay Smaga, Peter Frenkel, Paul Nihill and Vladimir Golubnichy
(picture Getty Images)*

The team doctors worked furiously on his leg during the 4 day break before the 50km but had only limited success. He finished 9th in the 50km with 4:14:09. His legs felt heavy and he had obviously not recovered from the 20km race.

Two days later on 5th September 1972, on his 33rd birthday, the Munich Olympic Games terrorist attack took place.

Nihill retired in early 1973, citing a lack of incentive after Munich for his decision. He swapped over to road running, with just the occasional local walk. As far as he was concerned, he had retired from international standard sport.

Late in 1975, he had second thoughts. It might be nice after all to become the first British male athlete to compete at four Olympic Games (an achievement not equalled until Daley Thompson in 1988).

At 35 years of age, he still had enough speed in his legs to win the AAA 3000m title. He backed up with third in the 1976 National 20km in 1:31:38, thus gaining selection for the Montreal Olympic Games 20km, where he finished 30th in 1:36:40.4.



Paul Nihill trains in the 1976 Olympic Village with Australian Ross Hayward

But that was definitely the final roll of the dice for him. This time, it would be a permanent retirement. And he stayed true to his word.

In 1976, he was awarded an MBE for services to sport. With this recognition, he joined Don Thompson who had already received an MBE. Ken Matthews would receive his MBE the following year (1977).

The most versatile of British walkers, Nihill won 27 AAA and many more RWA championship titles between 1963 and 1975. His AAA championship wins included

AAA 10 Miles Road:	4 golds
AAA 20km Road:	6 golds
AAA 2 Miles / 3 km Track:	4 golds
AAA 20 Miles Road:	6 golds
AAA 50km Road:	3 golds
AAA 7 Miles / 10 km Track:	4 golds

In the period from 1956 to 1975, Nihill did 574 races, of which he won 358, was second in 53 and third in 43. In Britain, he won 96 races consecutively from 1967 to 1971. In international races, he had 51 consecutive wins.

Nihill's punishing training sessions were the stuff of legend, like those of his contemporary and fellow Olympian Don Thompson. In the early 1960s, he trained under the eye of former Belgrave Harriers international George Williams. Williams encouraged him to perform sprint repetitions. Writing in the Race Walking Record 35 years later, Nihill said:

On several occasions we did sixty sprints and thereafter a hard road session up and down hills. One thing I always credit the sprints with was giving me my rhythm, something I did not have prior to meeting up with George. He also introduced me to drinking but that's another story. Later in my racewalking life, when attempting not too serious comebacks, I always prepared by doing "George Williams 100s", plus road work of course. We not only did 100s but 200s, 300s, 400s and 800s, all with little rest between them. If they weren't beneficial, I would not have done them.

Nihill continued to move in racewalking circles after his retirement, doing the occasional race and serving a term as President of the Race Walking Association. He has also continued his association with his first love boxing, holding many positions over a longer period of time.

As well as his various sporting interests, he used to present a midweek show on BBC Radio Medway on 50's rock 'n' roll music – of which he was an expert and had a huge collection.

In 2013, he finally announced that he had done his last walking race. It was time to hang up the shoes for good after a career spanning 60 years. ⁶



Paul Nihill shows off some of his large memorabilia collection on the occasion of his official retirement in 2013
(Photo <https://www.kentonline.co.uk>)

6 See <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/medway/news/olympic-ace-decides-to-call-2617/>

In 2016, Nihill was honoured to have a road in Addiscombe named after him. It was only fitting that the road-naming ceremony took place on the day on which the 50km walk was taking place at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro.



I did like the comment by the Inside Croydon reporter:

*Sadly, we believe that the developers have missed a trick, by opting to call the road Nihill Place. Nihill Walk would have been much more fitting.*⁷

The final months of his life were spent in Amherst Court care home in Chatham, Kent. Seeing the ravages of the covid pandemic, his family had arranged to walk a 50km fund raiser for the home on Sunday 13th December 2020. They had hoped Nihill would join them for the final mile, but he was too ill, and died only 2 days later on Tuesday 15th December, from complications arising from his own coronavirus infection.

As a four-time Olympian, European champion and Olympic silver medallist, Nihill deserves his place as of the all-time greats of race walking. He is also my pick as the best ever British walker. Olympic gold eluded him, but his longevity and the quality of his walking over all distances make him stand out, even nowadays.

A review of his major meet placings shows the quality of his walking, over an extended period.

12-10-1963	2 nd IAAF Lugano Cup	Varese, ITALY	2 nd	20km	1:33:18
01-07-1964	18 th Olympic Games	Tokyo, JAPAN	2 nd	50km	4:11:31
01-07-1968	19 th Olympic Games	Mexico City, MEXICO	DNF	50km	-
24-09-1969	9 th European Championships	Athens, GREECE	1 st	20km	1:30:48
10-10-1970	5 th IAAF Lugano Cup	Eschborn, GERMANY	15 th	20km	1:33:10
10-08-1971	10 th European Championships	Helsinki, FINLAND	3 rd	20km	1:27:34
31-08-1972	20 th Olympic Games	Munich, GERMANY	6 th	20km	1:28:44
03-09-1972	20 th Olympic Games	Munich, GERMANY	9 th	50km	4:14:09
23-07-1976	21 st Olympic Games	Montreal, CANADA	30 th	20km	1:36:40

His personal bests of **11:51.2** (3000m), **20:14.2** (5000m) **1:24:50** (20km) and **4-11:31** (50km) have stood the test of time and remain competitive in this modern era.

Additional References:

- The Official Centenary History of the AAA by Peter Lovesey, 1979
- Unbroken Contact: One Hundred Years of Walking With Surrey Walking Club, Edited by Sandra Brown, 1999
- British Olympic Association Official Report of the Olympic Games 1964
- British Olympic Association Official Report of the Olympic Games 1968
- British Olympic Association Official Report of the Olympic Games 1972
- RaceWalking Record Archive at <http://www.racewalkuk.com/Archive/Archives.asp>

⁷ See <https://insidecroydon.com/2016/08/18/olympic-medallist-nihill-to-be-honoured-in-addiscombe/>

By way of a postscript, at a ceremony on Saturday 23rd October 2021 in the National Exhibition Centre, Paul was posthumously inducted into the England Athletics Hall Of Fame. It was one final honour that was long overdue.

Tim Erickson

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