

RAÚL GONZÁLEZ – MEXICAN WALKER EXTRAORDINARY

One of the most significant events in the history of racewalking quietly took place in 1966 when Mexico hired a group of foreign coaches to help their athletes prepare for the 1968 Olympic Games. Amongst the new arrivals was Polish coach Jerzy Hausleber who went on to revolutionize walking and single handedly lead Mexico to the top of world walking.

An unknown 29 year old army sergeant by the name of Jose Pedraza claimed the nation's first international title when he won the 10,000m walk at the 1966 Central American and Caribbean Games in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He was soon to become world famous when in the Mexico Olympics he went within a whisker of taking gold in the 20km walk. After 85 minutes of hard walking in the thin high altitude air of Mexico City, Volodymyr Golubnichiy had entered the stadium in first place, followed closely by teammate Nikolai Smaga. Then the 60,000-plus spectators went wild as Pedraza appeared. Two hundred metres from the finish, Pedraza passed Smaga and set his sights on Golubnichiy. Pedraza's style seemed far from legal and he received three cautions. But it would have taken a suicidal judge to disqualify him while the stadium echoed with chants of "May-hee-co" and "Pay-drah-zah." An international incident was avoided when Golubnichiy drew away slightly in the homestretch to win by a mere three yards.

With racewalking now a high profile event in Mexico, Hausleber was soon in charge of a large squad of would-be champions, led by two walkers who would go on to become legends in their own right - Daniel Bautista and Raúl González who was one of my heroes as a young walker.

Raúl González Rodríguez was born on 29th February 1952 in Rancho Las Lajas, in the Nuevo Leon, Mexico. From 1971 (aged 19) to 1987, he competed internationally, earning 13 medals in international competitions. Let's start by reviewing the list.

1971	Central American and Caribbean Champs	Kingston, Jamaica	3 rd	10 km	
1972	Olympic Games	Mexico City, Mexico	20 th	50 km	4:26:13
1974	Central American and Caribbean Games	Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic	1 st	20 km	
1976	Olympic Games	Montreal, Canada	5 th	20 km	1:28:18
1977	World Race Walking Cup	Milton Keynes, England	1 st	50 km	4:04:16
1978	Central American and Caribbean Games	Medellín, Colombia	2 nd	20 km	
1979	Pan American Games	San Juan, Puerto Rico	1 st	50 km	4:05:17
	World Race Walking Cup		4 th	50 km	3:46:36
1980	Olympic Games	Moscow, Soviet Union	6 th	20 km	1:27:48
			DNF	50 km	-
1981	World Race Walking Cup	Valencia, Spain	1 st	50 km	3:48:30
	Central American and Caribbean Champs	Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic	2 nd	20 km	
1982	Central American and Caribbean Games	Havana, Cuba	2 nd	20 km	
			1 st	50 km	
1983	World Race Walking Cup	Bergen, Norway	1 st	50 km	3:45:36
	Pan American Games	Caracas, Venezuela	2 nd	20 km	1:29:21
			1 st	50 km	4:00:51
	World Championships	Helsinki, Finland	9 th	20 km	1:22:06
			5 th	50 km	3:53:51
1984	Olympic Games	Los Angeles, United States	2 nd	50 km	3:45:36
1987	Pan American Games	Indianapolis, United States	2 nd	50 km	4:07:27
	World Championships	Rome, Italy	11 th	50 km	3:53:30

His most notable victories included wins in the 1977, 1981 and 1983 World Walking Cups, the 1979 and 1983 Pan American Games and the 1984 Olympics, all over 50km. In perhaps his greatest double, he took silver in the 1984 Olympic 20km event as well.

Regarded by most commentators as the fairest technician in the world, he did not fit the usual Mexican mould of small walkers with blinding leg speed. Standing 5'9" (175 cm) and weighing 141 lbs (64 kg), his build was more typical of the top European walkers and his long ranging stride covered the ground effortlessly. I don't have much footage on him but the following poor quality YouTube video shows him winning the Olympic 20km in 1984: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2R9Sykf-2Zo>.



González the perfect stylist

In the space of 12 months, he rewrote the record books in the 50km event. First in April 1978 in Mixhua, Mexico, he took a huge 7 minutes of Bernd Kannenberg's world record with 3:45:52. Two months later in June 1978 in Poděbrady, Czechoslovakia, he improved the mark a further 4 minutes to record 3:41:20 (this time is still the North American record 34 years later). Then in 1979 in Bergen, Norway, he set a new track world record of 3:41:38.4. Since then walkers have chipped away at the records but no one in the last 40 years has raised the bar to the same extent as González. Consider the World Record Progression

4:40:15	Hermann Müller (GER)	1921-09-07	Munich, Germany
4:36:22	Karl Hähnel (GER)	1924-09-24	Berlin, Germany
4:34:03	Paul Sievert (GER)	1924-10-05	Munich, Germany
4:30:22	Romano Vecchietti (ITA)	1928-09-16	Rome, Italy
4:26:41	Edgar Bruun (NOR)	1936-06-28	Oslo, Norway
4:24:47	Viggo Invorsen (DEN)	1941-08-17	Odense, Denmark
4:23:40	Josef Doležal (TCH)	1946-08-04	Poděbrady, Czechoslovakia
4:23:14	Josef Doležal (TCH)	1952-08-24	Poděbrady, Czechoslovakia
4:20:30	Vladimir Ukhov (URS)	1952-08-29	Leningrad, Soviet Union
4:16:06	Josef Doležal (TCH)	1954-09-12	Poděbrady, Czechoslovakia
4:07:29	Anatoliy Yegorov (URS)	1955-11-17	Tbilisi, Soviet Union
4:05:13	Grigoriy Klimov (URS)	1956-08-10	Moscow, Soviet Union
4:03:53	Anatoliy Vedyakov (URS)	1959-08-13	Moscow, Soviet Union
4:03:02	Abdon Pamich (ITA)	1960-10-16	Ponte San Pietro, Italy
4:01:39	Grigoriy Klimov (URS)	1961-08-17	Leningrad, Soviet Union
4:00:50	Mikhail Lavrov (URS)	1961-09-05	Kazan, Soviet Union
3:55:36	Gennadiy Agapov (URS)	1965-10-17	Alma Ata, Soviet Union
3:52:45	Bernd Kannenberg (GDR)	1972-05-27	Bremen, West Germany
3:45:52	Raúl González (MEX)	1978-04-23	Mixhuca, Mexico
3:41:20	Raúl González (MEX)	1978-06-11	Poděbrady, Czechoslovakia
3:40:46	Josep Marín (ESP)	1983-03-13	Valencia, Spain
3:38:31	Ronald Weigel (GDR)	1984-07-20	Berlin, Germany
3:38:17	Ronald Weigel (GDR)	1986-05-25	Potsdam, Germany
3:37:41	Andrey Perlov (URS)	1989-08-05	Leningrad, Soviet Union
3:37:26	Valeriy Spitsyn (RUS)	2000-05-21	Moscow, Russia
3:36:39	Robert Korzeniowski (POL)	2002-08-08	Munich, Germany
3:36:03	Robert Korzeniowski (POL)	2003-08-27	Paris, France
3:35:47	Nathan Deakes (AUS)	2006-12-02	Geelong, Australia
3:34:14	Denis Nizhegorodov (RUS)	2008-05-11	Cheboksary, Russia

He was also no slouch over 20km, with a PB of 1:21:49, set in 1984.

Like many of the walking champions before and after him, he walked from the front, never scared to lay his cards on the table for all to see. His 1984 Olympic 50km victory was one such race. The day was hot as the race started and it only got hotter for its 4 hour duration. He went out very hard, taking a chance in the heat, broke the field open and had

dropped everybody by 40km, eventually winning by almost six minutes.



González wins the 1984 Olympic 50km title in Los Angeles and is mobbed by the many Hispanic fans

But the race which sits in the forefront for me is his 4th place in the 1979 World Cup 50km in Eschborn, West Germany. Colin Young's report in the Athletics Weekly sums it up

50 Kilometres: Raul Gonzales The Incredible

(September 30th; 08.00 hrs) Willi Sawall, blasted off as if it were a 10km race but within a couple of kilometres the impeccable Raul Gonzales had taken the lead and proceeded to reel off the following 5km splits - 21:31, 21.16 (42:47), 21:20, 20:56! (1:25:03), 21:10, 21:16 (2:07:29) - in the most outstanding piece of race walking I, and probably anyone else, have ever witnessed. It seemed impossible that he could maintain anything like this incredible pace for the full distance, and so it proved as Raul suddenly slowed after 35km (2:30:43).

Chasing the Mexican were his colleagues Enrique Vera, Martin, Bermudez and Pedro Aroche (later disqualified), the Soviet trio of Viktor Dorovskikh, Vyacheslav Fursov and Pyotr Melnik, and the gutsy Sawall from Australia. At halfway Sawall surprisingly burst away from the group but was recaptured and quickly dropped; however he showed his world class ability by hanging on to finish 10th in 3:51:08 and will undoubtedly benefit from the experience in Moscow next year. With Gonzales in sight, the group broke up at 40km, Vera taking the lead from Dorovskikh, Bermudez and Fursov. Into the final lap it looked odds-on a victory for the diminutive Mexican, much improved in technique following his long stay in Britain and France after the last Lugano Cup, However, Bermudez had passed a now rather ragged Dorovskikh and, putting in a storming finish, caught Vera in the final kilometre for a sensational victory in 3:43:36. Amidst all the excitement Gonzales had somehow recovered and, finishing strongly, repassed Fursov to make certain that Mexico retained the trophy.

The brilliant young East German, Dietmar Meisch, left the main bunch early in the race, caught Otto Bartsch and later Sawall only to be caught in the final kilometre by 'the fastest finisher of all, Jose Marin, who had 10km splits of 46:20, 55:31, 46:18, 46:09 and 45:28! The Fiamme Gialle trio of Paolo Gregucci, Sandro Bellucci and Domenico Carpentieri all had tremendous races, with the last named surprising everyone With his well judged, sustained effort. For once, Gerhard Weidner was not the first West German home, having almost a mediocre race (4:01:01!) in comparison with others around, and it was Hans Binder who pleased home fans with a sterling performance.

I was in that race and walking a PB yet he lapped me as if I was standing still. It was at that time I realised that a 50km performance in the low 3:30's was possible. That realization has yet to be fulfilled. When Nathan Deakes set his world record of 3:35:47 in December 2006, his 30km split was around 2:08:00, some 30 secs behind Gonzalez at that point.

It is tantalising to consider a cross-era 50km including the likes of Gonzalez, Kannenberg, Korzeniowski, Deakes and Nizhegorodov, all equally prepared and trained and all equally set to race. They would all be keen to take the lead and stamp their authority on the race and the pace would be on from the gun. Who would win – no one can say but would I love to be trackside!



González in his last international race in 1987 (in green on right) – handing over the baton to the next generation



2007 at the IAAF World Champs in Osaka at the Mexican feed station in the 50km event

Happy 60th birthday Raúl

Tim Erickson
6 March 2012