

## VALE ROLAND HARDY 1926-2016

When 90 year old double Olympian Roland Hardy died in England last week, we lost a key player in one of the most unsavoury pieces of racewalking history which occurred when controversy over racewalking style came to a crisis in the 1950s and virtually ended international track walking.

It started with the the 1950 European Championships in Brussels. Britain had two Sheffield walkers, Roland Hardy and Laurence Allen, whose performances in Britain (Hardy had won the A.A.A. 2 and 7 miles in outstanding times and Allen was the RWA 10 and 20 miles champion) made them strong prospects for medals. This they confirmed by establishing such a lead in the European Championship 10,000m 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 were 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 8mph 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.

To their credit, Hardy and Allen bounced back and continued to walk superbly in England and, more importantly, continued to satisfy the tough English judges. Hardy reduced the A.A.A. 2 miles best to 13:27.8 and the 7 miles to 50:05.6 and both walkers were duly selected to compete in the 10,000m walk at the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki. In fact, they went into the race as co-favourites.

Two heats were used to decide who of the 23 entrants would make the Olympic 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.



**Roland Hardy leads the first of the two 1952 Olympic 10,000m walk heats from Australian Don Keane and Bruno Junk of Russia. Eventual gold medallist John Mikaelsson of Sweden is fifth in this picture.**

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. (As an aside, Junk's gold medal was the first ever Russian Olympic walking medal and marked the start of the Eastern European domination which has continued to the present day.)

The judges, who had disqualified seven men in the heats and final, were made to look foolish. Jack Crump, writing in 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 from the program and replace it with a 20km contest in 1956.

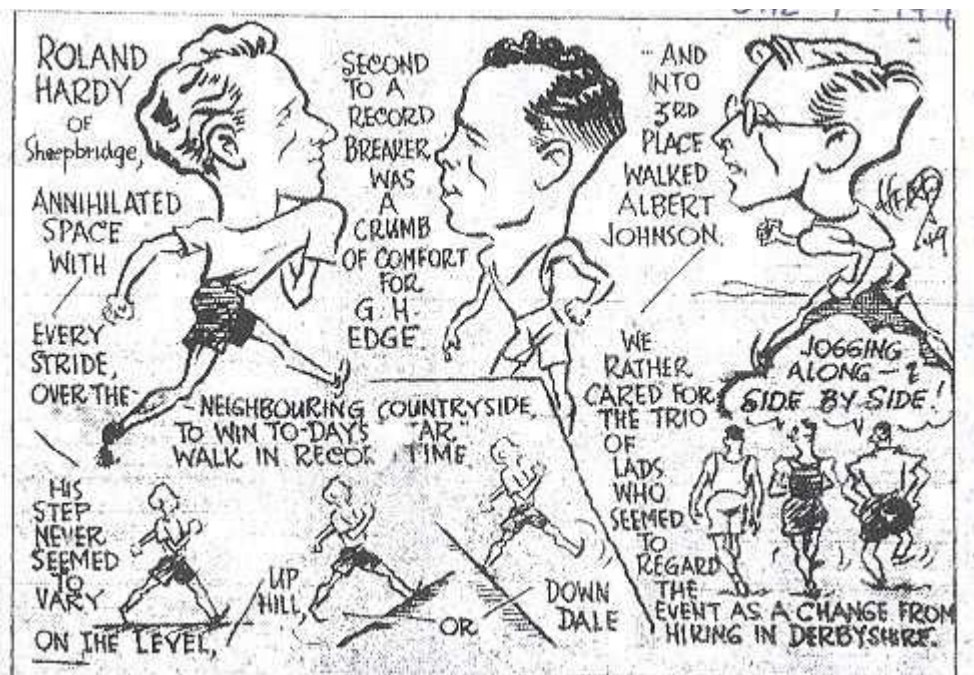
With the historical context set, let's zoom on on Roland. Most of the following biography is taken from an article written by Derbyshire author Tom Bates (see article at <http://www.northernracewalking.com/products/derbyshire-living-legend/>).

Roland was born on June 11<sup>th</sup> 1926 at 42 Carlisle Street, Sheepbridge, and later attended Mary Swanwick School at Old Whittington where he excelled at woodwork and represented the school at both football and cricket. He left school during the war years and worked at the Wagon Repairs Depot at Sheepbridge. Whilst playing centre-half in the local football league with Newbold Y.C. his sporting prowess was noted by soccer manager Teddy Davison, who promptly signed him for Sheffield United. Eighteen months later National Service put paid to his burgeoning soccer career and he served in the Royal Artillery for two years, first in Northern Ireland and later at Royston in Hertfordshire, on the Searchlight Battery.

After his demobilisation he became a fitter at the Summit Works on Whittington Moor and took up walking on the recommendation of Ernest Clay who invited him to train with Sheffield United Harriers. His first competitive race was the 1949 Sheffield Star Walk - which he won, setting a new record and beating the old (1947) record by 53 seconds! In fact, he regarded this first 'win' as his most cherished memory. To quote Tom Bates

*That boyish grin lit up his face; "Well, meeting the Queen was the high point, I suppose, I was presented to Her Majesty by Lord Burleigh, along with the rest of the British Olympic Team in 1953" he said, he mused a moment, and then "but what I remember best of all, and cherish most is the Star Walk, coming over the hill at Sheffield Lane Top in sight of the finish and suddenly - a sea of faces, hundreds and hundreds of people cheering - and my mother and father and all the family waiting at the finishing line outside the Star offices and waving me towards the line". His face beamed as he relived the moment, before adding wistfully, "I was ever so pleased because they were there to see me and I made them feel so proud".*

The win was commemorated by this cartoon in the local Star Newspaper by Heap



#### 1949 – Hardy wins the Sheffield Star Walk

A sporting phenomenon named Roland Hardy had arrived, and his rise up the ranks was meteoric. He was peerless, winning races and breaking records wherever he went and within eighteen months of his Star Walk triumph he was representing Great Britain at the European Championships in Brussels.

In July 1950, at the tender young age of 22, he won his first British Championship in the 7 Miles Walk, in the process breaking Harry Churcher's 5 Miles world record by 9 seconds! A week later, he won the A.A.A. 2 Miles Walk Championship. He repeated this double again in 1951 and again in 1952.

In his 1952 double (winning the 2 Miles walk on the Saturday and the 7 Miles walk on the Sunday), he brought the first ever national title home to the newly formed Derbyshire AAA. His 7 Miles Walk win saw him smash four of his own records; he broke the British all-comers, National, and English native records and knocked a further 9 seconds off his own World 5 Miles record.

The rest, as they say, is history - and the stuff of legend; two Olympic Games and a string of representative honours followed, and though Roland was "never been one for keeping records", he recalled being made a Life Member of Sheffield United Harriers and that he continued walking competitively - "and for fun" - until he was in his forties.

Of course in those early days of television, outside broadcasts were almost unheard of and champion sportsmen, especially of the amateur variety, were largely anonymous. In fact, it was not until Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile barrier in 1954 that the nation became gradually switched-on to outside broadcast athletics - though it was another decade before viewers were able to watch International Athletics events like European Championships and the Olympic Games with any degree of regularity. These days all major athletics events are beamed via satellite to television sets in homes all over the world, and in the lucrative commercial television market sports sponsorship is big business. Champion athletes are household names; our sporting heroes are honoured by wealth and celebrity.

We live in an age when our champions are fully professional, most with their own professional entourage of physiotherapists, trainers, dieticians and a whole host of technical products designed to aid fitness and thus enhance performance. The sporting stakes and rewards have never been so high. Things were very different fifty years ago during that austere period just after the second-world war when ration books still ruled and petrol was purchased by coupons.

Roland, third eldest of a family of eight children, had to train himself - aided by his brother Walter on a bicycle - buy his own kit, pay his own expenses, and exist on a spartan diet controlled by the government ration book. He was a familiar sight pounding the roads around the Whittington area and as a schoolboy Tom Bates remembers joining others who ran alongside him and cheered him on as his familiar figure strode swiftly down Sheffield Road in hot pursuit of his brother's pace-

making bicycle. When he won, there were no television pictures to bring news of his triumphant world-record breaking exploits or to hail him as the new British Champion - his magnificent achievement however, did manage to make page ten of the local (Derbyshire Times) newspaper!

Four years later, on August 17<sup>th</sup> 1956 he finally made the front page when the headline proclaimed "Roland Hardy Selected for Olympic Team". It went on, "Roland Hardy of Sheffield Road, Whittington Moor, who earlier this year smashed two more road-walking records, is Derbyshire's only representative in the British team for the Olympic Games at Melbourne later this year."

In the 1956 Games, Roland finished a commendable eighth in the 20km walk in the Melbourne heat with 1:34:41, a completely different experience from his first Olympic Games four years earlier when he had been disqualified.

He won an impressive 14 national championships between 1950 and 1956

1<sup>st</sup> A.A.A. 2 Miles Championship 1950 (13:46.8), 1951 (13:43.2) and 1952 (13:27.8)

1<sup>st</sup> A.A.A. 7 Miles Championship 1950 (50:11.6), 1951 (51:14.6), 1952 (50:05.6), 1953 (51:47.0) and 1955 (53:04.6)

1<sup>st</sup> R.W.A. 10 Miles Championship 1952 (73:16), 1953 (74:53.4), 1954 (74:16), 1955 (74:47) and 1956 (74:31)

1<sup>st</sup> R.W.A. 10 Miles Championship 1956 (2:38:27)

and his sketch is found in the inaugural RWA 1962 edition of its "TheSport of Race Walking" book



He certainly kept his fitness for many years after he retired from serious racing in 1956. Tony Taylor reminisced on the occasion of his passing:

*Even though a great of the Sheffield UH, he was one of my early heroes. I remember watching with awe, both Roland and Lol Allen battling out a Northern 10 [probably?] in 1956/57 around the streets of Didsbury. Years later I was proud to race against him a couple of times in 1968, when he made a comeback to fend off Lancashire's emerging threat. In the Northern 10 at Matlock he finished 2<sup>nd</sup> to the new star, Jake Warhurst in 74:44.*

I finish this piece with some additional insights by Tom Bates.

*I learned that his family, and particularly his parents were his motivation."Of course, I wanted to win - no athlete likes to be beaten," explained Roland, "but I never wanted anything out of it, not for myself anyway. I never wanted any fame or glory, I just wanted to win for my family - and besides, there were some good prizes to be won, canteens of cutlery and such - and times were hard."*

I began to understand the true nature of real sportsmanship and sporting endeavour, especially when I asked if I could see the many medals and trophies, certificates, British Representative Caps etc, that Roland had won over the years, and the almost inevitable scrap-book full of news cutting and photographs - but he had very little to show me. He managed to find just one medal - from the Melbourne Olympic Games of 1956, and a couple of old photographs; typical of this

extremely personable and modest man, he had given the rest away to members of his family, including his four grandchildren, each of whom he adores and who, no doubt, are justifiably proud of their legendary grandfather.

I thanked him for showing them to me and for being such a gracious host and then I left, satisfied that I had learned enough during my visit to write a special tribute to a local living legend, a man I had long since respected and admired, and my lasting impression of Roland Hardy is of a somewhat shy, modest and retiring 78 year-old widower who in every way proved to be the true sporting gentleman that I had always believed him to be.

2016 marks the passing of one our racewalk legends. Long may his memory linger with us.

Tim Erickson  
Monday 26 September 2016

References:

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