

THIRUKUMARAN BALAYSENDARAN - BAREFOOT WALKER

There have always been barefoot runners, the most famous being Ethiopia's Abebe Bikila who won the first of his consecutive Olympic marathon gold medals in 1960, sans shoes, in a world record 2:15:17. And now the shoe companies have come to the fore with a whole range of 'minimalist running shoes'.

But that's running. Surely you can't racewalk in bare feet on unforgiving bitumen and cement surfaces? Think again! Yes, while it's hard enough to complete a 20km or 50km racewalk with a pair of good shoes, Malaysian walker Thirukumaran Balaysendaran was well known for his barefoot walking, even in major races.

I was lucky enough to run into him in Hong Kong a couple of weeks ago at the 2013 MTR Hong Kong Race Walking meet. Now retired from racing, he was there managing the Malaysian walkers who were to compete in the 10km roadwalk.



Tim and Kumaran in Hong Kong in October 2013

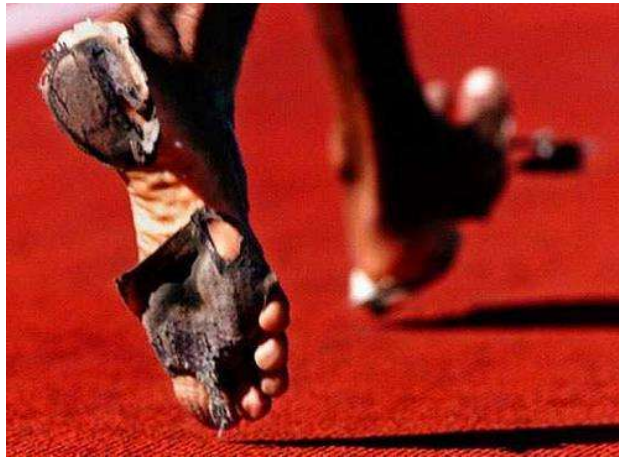
Kumaran, born 2nd February 1969, competed barefoot for his entire career until he retired in 2011 and it does not seem to have inconvenienced him or left him with any lasting issues. He competed in a number of major internationals, including

1997 IAAF Racewalking World Cup, Podebrady	20km	105 th	1:31:17
1998 Commonwealth Games, Kuala Lumpur	50km	9 th	4:44:33
1999 IAAF Racewalking World Cup, Mézidon-Canon	20km	90 th	1:37:12
2001 South East Asian Games, Kuala Lumpur	20km	3 rd	1:34:30

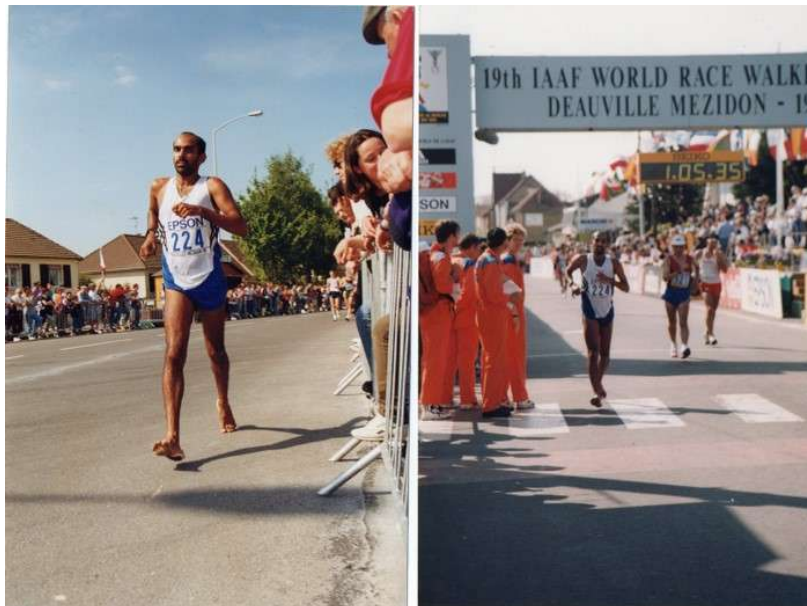
His 1997 World Cup walk was captured on video - check it out at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eN3bscX7gKE>. Those are cobblestones! He did not finish last by any means - he was 105th out of 134 finishers in what is probably the largest international racewalk field ever assembled.

He finished his career with PBs of 4:21:33 for 50km (done in the 1998 Malaysian Open Championship) and 1:30:25 for the 20km (done in 1997).

We even saw his barefoot walking in Sydney in February 2000 when he competed in the Australian 20km championships, being held on the Homebush course which was to be used in the Olympics that year. On that occasion, he finished 22nd in a time of 1:40:10, his unique walking mode being captured by the Sydney Morning Herald (see <http://www.smh.com.au/ftimages/2005/05/11/1115585021026.html>)



The caption read: *Thirukumaran Balaysendaran of Malaysia tramped Sydney's searing roads with the barest protection in the 20km walk in the Australian Track and Field Championships.*



Kumaran competing in the 1999 World Cup in Mezidon



Now this is an interesting newspaper snippet - it;s not always easy being a barefoot walker and convincing offialdom that you are allowed to compete in the event.

Of course, there was one occasion when he donned shoes, perhaps understandably! It was in 2009 when he competed in the annual Malaysian 12 Hour Endurance walk in Putrajaya, the country's new administrative centre, just outside Kuala Lumpur. As usual, the event saw huge mass participation (just to put some perspective on it, there were 369 competitors in the men's 12 Hour event and 286 competitors in the women's 12 Hour event). And the shoes must have done the trick as Kumaran won the event overall with a distance of 101km in oppressive conditions.



Kumaran (4251) leads the 2009 Malaysian 12 Hour Walk

He returned for a repeat win in this event in 2010 and I assume he compromised and also wore shoes again on that occasion!

He retired in 2011 but is still involved in our sport, coaching some school / junior athletes in Selangor State where he runs a small trading business.

His place seems assured in walking history as we are perhaps unlikely to see a barefoot walker on the international stage again.

Tim Erickson
October 2013