

TOMMY GREEN – 1932 OLYMPIC CHAMPION

Born on 30th March 1894, Tommy Green of England suffered rickets as a child and was unable to walk until he was 5 years old. At age 12, he lied about his age and joined the army. A couple of years later, he was invalided out when a horse fell on him. Recalled to service in 1914, he was wounded three times in World War 1 and finally sent home again in 1917 after being badly gassed while fighting in France.

It was therefore not surprising to find he was a late starter to the sport of walking and the cause of this was unusual to say the least – it was a case of doing a good turn to a blind man. In 1925, he accompanied Mr W. Lowings, Eastleigh's blind walker, in training for a St Dunstan's event, and Mr Lowings persuaded Green that he ought to go in for walking races.

Green, already over 30 years of age, joined Belgrave Harriers and belatedly started what was to become a wonderful career. His first few years in the sport were spent in testing himself over the shorter distances but, with long distance walking at the height of its popularity, it was not surprising that he soon turned his thoughts to the classic long distance events on offer.

His first forays were in 1929. In September he was victorious in his first London to Brighton. His winning time was a superb **8:15:41** for the 52 mile walk and was the second fastest ever Brighton, only 4 minutes outside the 1909 record set by H. Voss. This was followed in October by a win in the Manchester to Blackpool (51 miles) with a sub 8 hour performance (**7:56:55**), the second best time ever recorded on that tough course and only 13 minutes in arrears of the remarkable 1909 time of 7:43:53 recorded by Tom Payne. Finally he finished off his racing year in November with second place in the annual International 100 km roadwalk event in Milan, Italy.

This started a remarkable 5 year period in which he was unchallenged over the long distances.

1930 was a wonderful year by any measure. He won the inaugural Hastings to Brighton (37 miles) in **6:00:35** and followed this up in July with a win the inaugural British R.W.A. 50 km championship in **4:35:36**, a time which was announced as a new world record. Then in August, he won the Nottingham to Birmingham (55 miles) in **8:41:2**, easily eclipsing the previous record. Come September, he won his second London to Brighton, this time in an astonishing **8:02:55** – 11 mins under Voss's 1909 record - in spite of having to contend with rainstorms and flooded roads. This win in particular was given huge press in the local papers of the time and the English A.A.A. presented a special gold medal to him in recognition of his performance. A month later, he defended his title in the Manchester to Blackpool in a new course record of **7:39:30**, 4 minutes under Tom Payne's course record. Finally he finished his racing year in November with a win in the International 100 km race, held once again in Milan in Italy. He defeated a large field including the title holder Olivone in a new record of **10:30:24**.

The press of the time reported as follows

There is no doubt that T. W. Green accomplished a brilliant performance in winning the international road walk over 100 km (62 miles 180 yards) at Milan in November. It was a wonderful feat on the part of the English competitor to win the longest distance walking race in the world. Many past champions have tried and very few have succeeded. The long weekend journey, with a nasty Channel crossing, has beaten most athletes. On this occasion, green was rather ill after crossing, so that his victory is all the more satisfactory. Green made no mistakes. He gradually outpaced and outstayed all his rivals.

This year the course was extended to well over 100 kilometres, which makes Green's time a new record. Thousands of people saw the finish, and Green had a tremendous reception. His victory was expected, and proved very popular with the Italians who think Green is a marvel, and they should know, for they are a wonderful nation for this class of event. In my opinion, Green is the greatest walker in the world today.

1931 saw him once again taking everything by storm. Wins in the Hastings to Brighton (**6:06:54**), the Chelmsford to Ipswich over 40½ miles (**6:50:10**), the Settle to Bradford and a historic third win in the London to Brighton (**8:05:43**) cemented his position as the world's best. Then he capped it off with his third straight win in the Manchester to Blackpool (**7:50:27**).

The speedy and stylish nature of his 1931 Manchester to Blackpool walk can be gleamed from a short newsreel, captured for posterity on the BritishPathe website – see

<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/for-the-third-time/query/tommy+green>.



Tommy Green is hoisted shoulder high after winning his third successive London to Brighton in 1931. He covered the 52 miles in 8 hrs 5 mins 43 secs.

Controversies in the 1924 Olympic Games had spelt an end to Olympic track walking and indeed nearly spelt the end of walking. The sport was ruled out of the 1928 Amsterdam Games. Fortunately, there followed a change in walking fashion with road walking overtaking track walking in popularity and British officials worked together and bid for a long distance road event to be introduced into the Olympics. It was accepted and the first Olympic road walk, over 50 kilometres, was announced for the Los Angeles Games in 1932.

Tommy Green, at 38 years of age and the father of 4 children, was the obvious choice to represent Great Britain. As usual, he started the year in winning style when fronted for the Bradford Walk, held over 32 ½ miles and probably the oldest road event regularly held. In this tough race over the Yorkshire moors he won in **4:49:01**, breaking the course record by 12 minutes.

Such was the nature of amateur sport on those days that his family (he and wife Rose had 4 children) struggled while Tommy trained for the Olympics because, although the Railway gave him time off, it was unpaid. Further, the family had no money coming in for the entire seven weeks he was away at the Olympic games.

Affected by a temperature in the nineties which caused the tar on the roads to melt, Green's Olympic 50 km winning time of 4:50:10 was nearly a quarter of an hour slower than his personal best, but what really mattered was that he finished seven minutes ahead of his nearest rival, Janis Dalins of Latvia - a winning margin which has only once been exceeded in the 18 Olympic 50km races held since. He remains to this day the oldest man to win that title.

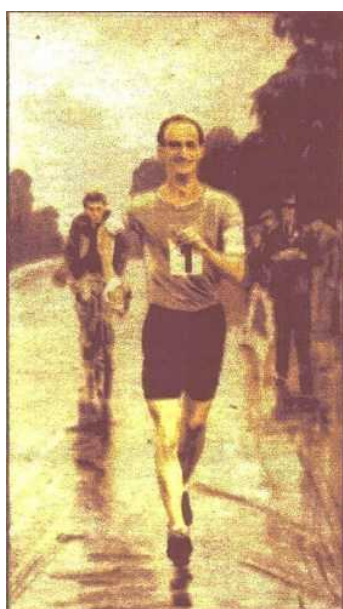
At halfway, Green, Dalins and Italy's Ugo Frigerio (winner of three short distance gold medals at the 1920 and 1924 Olympics) were level pegging, and they were still together at the three-quarters distance before Frigerio dropped back. The next to experience a crisis was Green himself, who fell a minute behind Dalins at one stage before being rejuvenated by cold water being thrown over him. Producing a strong finish, Green covered the final quarter of the race faster than any of the preceding segments and that, combined with the stomach cramps which beset Dalins, enabled him to win by close to a mile. As soon as he could, he sent a telegram to his wife Rose back in Hampshire. *"I won the gold medal. Very hot. See you all soon. Love Tom."*

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| 1. | Thomas Green | GBR | 4:50:10 |
| 2. | Janis Dalinsch | LAT | 4:57:20 |
| 3. | Ugo Frigerio | ITA | 4:59:06 |



Tommy Green, wearing number 98, is at the head of the field during the 50km Walk at the Los Angeles Olympics

When he returned to Eastleigh after the games Leigh Road was said to be lined six deep and he was carried aloft in a chair to a civic reception on the town bandstand. Such was his fame that he was accorded the ultimate recognition for a sports star of that era – his image appeared on a Players cigarette card!



1932 – Tommy Green appeared on a Players cigarette card after his Olympic victory

He was quickly back in action in September for what most pundits thought would be a fourth successive London to Brighton win. But on this occasion, J. H. Ludlow turned the tables and won in 8:01:06, beating Green's record by nearly 2 minutes. Green was relegated to an unfamiliar second place, almost 5 minutes in arrears. By October, he was back in winning style with a record fourth victory in the Manchester to Blackpool (7:49:19).

By now, contenders like Ludlow and the young Harold Whitlock were starting to match Green but he was not one to quietly give in. 1933 saw him win the Hastings to Brighton in 5:51:25, beating Harold Whitlock's record by over 4 minutes. This was followed by another victory in the Bradford Walk (4:59:20). Then he turned the tables on Ludlow to win a fourth London to Brighton, his time of 8:01:19 just 13 seconds outside the new course record. Finally in October, he won a fifth straight Manchester to Blackpool (8:14:46).

This wonderful photo, taken at White City in London in September 1933, captures Tommy Green during his attempt on the 8 Hour World Record. He is shown leading fellow walker Tommy Richardson.



1934 was a quiet year by his standard. He contested few races but was still able to win his beloved Manchester to Blackpool for a sixth straight year (**8:33:07**). He remains the most prolific winner ever of this event and his 1930 record time was still unchallenged when the event was stopped in 1962.

1934 was also significant in other ways. In that year, Tommy lost a thumb in an accident at the Railway Works and he left. He received no compensation and so pawned all of his trophies to raise cash to become the landlord of the Meadow Bank Hotel on Twyford Road. Tommy was later able to redeem his trophies and they went on display in the hotel.



Tommy Green with his trophies in 1932 – before he had to sell them

In 1935, Green's thoughts once again turned to the Olympics and he returned to solid training, focusing on the 50 km distance. He was over 40 years of age and had spent the last 6 years contesting every major race every year. This time, he was frugal in his racing and his only high profile appearance was in the R.W.A 50 km title, held at Bradford in June. There he and Harold Whitlock fiercely contested the lead for most of the race before Whitlock eventually won in 4:39:08 with Green only 29 seconds in arrears in **4:39:37**. It was a good start to his Olympic campaign.

The 1936 R.W.A. 50 km title was held on July 4 in Derby and was the official trial for the Berlin Games which were scheduled for August. This was the last throw of the dice for Green but on this occasion, the younger walkers were finally able to assert themselves. Whitlock won in a world best time of 4:30:38, Hopkins was second in 4:31:01 and Bentley was third in 4:33:32. Green was relegated to 4th place even though his finishing time would have won all previous editions of this event. History shows that Whitlock was selected to represent Great Britain and went on to win Olympic Gold.

This marked the end of Green's stellar career. He was 42 years of age and had held back Father Time for longer than most of us. But eventually youth prevailed and new careers replaced old ones.

During the Second World War, Tommy's pub became a popular venue for American servicemen because of Tommy's link with their homeland as participant in the Los Angeles Olympics. He also converted a room at the pub into a makeshift gym where another railway works employee, middleweight boxer Vince Hawkins, would train. Tommy Green also gave Hawkins financial backing and acted as trainer – the boxer went on to win two Lonsdale belts.¹

The Second World War also saw Tommy back in Uniform as Captain of Eastleigh's Home Guard.

In 1945 in order to celebrate the end of the war Tommy participated in a special 'Victory walk'. One hundred and forty six walkers set off from Eastleigh's Old Town Hall on a 50 km circuit which went to Lyndhurst and back via Southampton Civic Centre. Tommy, by then, aged 53 still managed to come 17th.

Tommy was president of Eastleigh Cricket Association, and held various positions in Southampton and Eastleigh Athletic Clubs. He also held positions in many local sporting and other organisations and was prominent in the Freemasons.

He died in 29 March 1975, one day short of his 81st birthday.

His place in athletics history is firmly cemented. During his reign at the top of walking, he was generally acknowledged as the finest long distance walker in the world and he holds the distinction of being the first Olympic road walking champion.

As an interesting side note, he never qualified as a Centurion. Even though he regularly walked the London to Brighton, he did not attempt any of the London to Brighton and Back walks which were held while he was competing (1926, 1929, 1933 and 1937). Perhaps it would have been the final icing on the cake for someone who had done everything else but I doubt if Tommy Green ever really regretted the decisions he made in his walking career.

In 2018, he was belatedly inducted into the Athletics England Hall of Fame.²

1 See <http://www.eastleighnews.co.uk/2012/07/eastleighs-olympic-hero/>

2 See <https://www.englandathletics.org/hall-of-fame/hall-of-fame-inductees/hall-of-fame-2018-inductees>.