

VENIAMIN SOLDATENKO – SOVIET MASTER WALKER: 1939 - 2023

Veniamin Vasilievich Soldatenko was born on 4th January 1939 in the village of Shkurovka in the steppes of Northern Kazakhstan. There was no school in Shkurovka at that time and he studied in the neighbouring village four kilometres away from his home. In any weather, he walked to school and back home six days a week. One wonders if this may have somehow influenced his rather unique method of training for racewalking where he regularly did 3 days of training in succession followed by a day of rest.

Before taking up walking, Soldatenko had tried many sports including boxing, short distance running, wrestling, weightlifting, gymnastics and acrobatics. With a light yet strongly built frame (175cm and 63 kg), he had a build that could be adapted to many sports. He opted for walking in 1962 while studying at the Physical Education College in Moscow after being targeted by Anatoly Frukto, one of the top coaches of the time.

Within two years, he had won his first title – the USSR 20 km championship. Right after that, his coach suggested that he master the 50 km event. It proved the correct move and, in 1969, he took the Russian record with 4:12:20.4. That same year, in his first international appearance over the distance, on the famous Marathon Highway in Greece, he was third in the European Championship with 4:23:04.



The 1970 Lugano Cup 50 km – Soldatenko (USSR), Lyungin (USSR), Selzer (GDR) and Bartsch (USSR)

In 1970, he enrolled in the University of Alma Ata (which was at that time the capital of Kazakhstan) as an undergraduate in sports studies and his career really took off. Training at an altitude of over 2000m, he built up that all important edge over his rivals. People in the highlands were accustomed to seeing the bespectacled pedestrian walking who knows where for who knows what. In the early days, herdsman on horseback raced him and once he even won a race against a tractor which had to stop because its radiator had boiled.

In that same year of 1970, he improved his best to 4:06:56.6, won at the prestigious Spartakiad of the Peoples of the USSR and won silver in the Lugano Cup at Eschborn in a time of 4:09:52. 1971 saw further improvement as he won the European Championship with a time of 4:02:22.

In his cut down top that showcased his superb physique and with his fluent easy style, he was an awe inspiring walker who captured our attention as youngsters coming into the sport. With his black unruly curls and inevitable headband, he was known as the 'Alma Ata hippy' and could not have been more different than his soviet compatriots in style of clothing, behaviour and outlook.

He had many fine races but two events in particular stand out in my memory.

The first was the 50 km walk in the 1972 Olympics. The winner was expected to be one of defending champion Christoph Holne, fellow East German Peter Selzer and Soldatenko. In the 1969 European Championships, Holne had won with Soldatenko third. In the 1970 Lugano Cup, Holne won and Soldatenko improved to second. In the 1971 European Championships, Soldatenko won and Holne was second. Then on September 20, 1971, in a USSR vs GDR 50 km road walk, Soldatenko, with a world best of 3:59:17.8, narrowly beat Peter Selzer who recorded 3:59:21. The 4 hour

barrier had finally been broken.

Yet the winner did not come from this elite trio. West German Bernd Kannenberg, a stocky 30 year old, had been, up till then, an aspiring 20 km walker with a best international performance of 9th in the 1971 European championships. Inauspiciously, he had failed to finish in the just completed Olympic 20 km event. Yet he led at every checkpoint in the Olympic 50 km race and, by the 35 km mark, only Kannenberg and Soldatenko were left. Soldatenko was slow in taking his refreshments at the final feeding station so Kannenberg decided to pick up the pace. Soldatenko, worried because he had already received a warning, did not respond. In 1977, he commented as follows on this silver medal ¹

The lack of skill in stepping from one foot to the other cost many walkers top honours and it cost me a gold Olympic medal in Munich. Although Kannenberg took the lead from the outset, I did not doubt my ultimate victory because I was at the peak of my form. Five kilometres before the entrance to the stadium, I made a mighty spurt, overtook Kannenberg and was ready to leave him behind but referees saw some technical flaws in my walking and made a warning to me. I did not want to run the risk of disqualification and carefully watched my style – so I won a silver medal.

The win was not totally surprising as Kannenberg had been credited with a 3:52 road performance shortly before the Games. There had been general scepticism about the performance but his Olympic victory lent credence to it.



Soldatenko and Kannenburg fight out the 1972 Olympic 50 km

Both walkers easily beat Soldatenko's road world best time of 3:59:17 and Kannenberg became an instant German hero. The final results read as follows

1.	Bernd KANNENBERG	GER	3:56:11.6
2.	Veniamin SOLDATENKO	USSR	3:58:24.0
3.	Larry YOUNG	USA	4:00:46.0
4.	Otto BARTCH	USSR	4:01:35.4
5.	Peter SELZER	GDR	4:04:05.4
6.	Gerhard WIEDNER	GER	4:06:26.0
7.	Vittorio VISINI	ITA	4:08:31.4
8.	Gabriel HERNANDEZ	MEX	4:12:09.0

The second event of particular interest to me was the first ever IAAF World championship, held on 18th September 1976 at Malmö in Sweden. In a black segment of Olympic walking history, the 50 km event was dropped after the 1972 Olympics, one of a number of events targeted in a move to reduce the size of what was seen as a bloated monster. The IAAF, always a strong supporter of walking, came to the rescue and staged its own IAAF World 50 km Championship in Malmo as a replacement event.

¹ *Long Distance Walker SOLDATENKO : the first and THE ONLY* by Vladimir Belyakov, Race Walking Record, September 1977

After his Olympic silver in 1972, Soldatenko had stepped back into his studies at Alma Ata and his results in the next couple of years had been modest. He recorded 4:01:33 in 1973 and 4:01:54 in 1974, the latter gaining him 8th place on the world list which was led by GDR's Christoph Holne with 3:52:52.8. But in 1975, he bounced back with a vengeance, winning again at the Spartakiad and leading the world list with 3:56:39.6.

Come 1976 and 42 walkers turned up in Malmö and it was Soldatenko who won in a personal best time of 3:54:40. One can only guess at the mighty battle which would have ensued if it had remained an Olympic event and Soldatenko and Kannenberg had faced the starter's gun shoulder to shoulder. The first 3 places on that occasion read as follows

- | | | | |
|----|---------------------|------|---------|
| 1. | Veniamin SOLDATENKO | USSR | 3:54:40 |
| 2. | Enrique VERA | MEX | 3:58:14 |
| 3. | Reima SALONEN | FIN | 3:58:53 |

As an addendum to this, in a huge about face, the IOC succumbed to pressure from the IAAF and reinstated the 50 km walk for the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Soldatenko was 37 years of age in 1976 and he would have been 41 years of age come the next Olympiad. In the 1977 interview quoted above, he commented as follows on his plans

Now I am going to make all my forces, knowledge and experience serve the achievement of my prime goal in my sporting plans – to win top honours in the Olympic race in Moscow. I know that a sportsman cannot maintain his top form continually but he can reach it before the principal competition in his life.

He did indeed continue to compete internationally for a further two years after 1976, gaining 4th place in the 50 km event in the 1977 Lugano Cup (4:08:20) and 2nd place in the 50 km event at the 1978 European Championships (3:55:12) but then his name disappears from the results lists. His time had come and gone and the world standard continued to improve. The three Russians in the 1979 World Cup 50 km event were all under 3:50 – Dorovski 3rd in 3:45:51, Fursov 5th in 3:46:55 and Melnik 6th in 3:49:31 – and even his old rival Bartsch was relegated to 15th place with his time of 3:53:32.



1975 - Soldatenko (USSR), Kannenberg (GER), Bartsch (USSR) and Holne (GDR) - the best four 50 km walkers of their era

He remains one of the legends of the sport and will have lasting recognition as the first walker to officially break the 4 hour barrier for the 50 km distance. His gold medals at IAAF and European levels, his silver medals at Olympic, Lugano and European levels and his bronze medal, again at European level, give him an enviable record of excellence. He was awarded the Order of the Badge of Honor in 1972 - conferred on citizens of the USSR for outstanding achievements in production, scientific research and social, cultural and other forms of social activity.

Finally, his international record reads as follows

1969	European Championship	Athens	50 km	3 rd	4:23:04
1970	Lugano Cup	Eschborn	50 km	2 nd	4:09:52
1971	European Championship	Helsinki	50 km	1 st	4:02:22
1972	Olympic Games	Munich	50 km	2 nd	3:58:24

1973	Lugano Cup	Lugano	50 km	4 th	4:01:33
1974	European Championship	Rome	50 km	5 th	4:09:31
1975	Lugano Cup	Le Grand Quevilly	50 km	DQ	
1976	IAAF World Championship	Malmo	50 km	1 st	3:54:40
1977	Lugano Cup	Milton Keynes	50 km	4 th	4:08:20
1978	European Championship	Praha	50 km	2 nd	3:55:12

His 20 km PB of 1:26:04 was done in 1968, early in his career, and his 50km PB was his 3:54:40, done in 1976 in Malmo.

Soldatenko died, aged 84, on Saturday 15th July 2023.