

VLADIMIR GOLUBNICHY 1936-2021

We were deeply saddened this week to hear the news that Ukraine's racewalking great **Vladimir Golubnichiy** (Volodymyr Holubnychy) had died on Monday 16th August at the age of 85.

Born on 2nd June 1936, Golubnichiy medaled at four Olympic Games (2 golds, 1 silver and 1 bronze), three European championships (gold, silver and bronze) and 2 Lugano Cups (2 silvers). He bettered the 20km World Record on 3 occasions, with two of those performances ratified as official records: 1:30:02.8 (02/10/1955, Kiev) and 1:27:05.0 (23/09/1958, Simferopol),

His career as a walker started by accident when, as a 13 year old, he was cajoled into taking place in a schools competition walk when the second school representative took sick. He won the event and the rest is history. At age 17, he easily won the Ukrainian 10km walk championship, beating a number of highly credentialed older walkers. He followed this up with Ukrainian records at various distances and in 1955, as a 19 year old, he became the 20km world record holder in winning in Kiev – his time was 1:30:02.8.

His record did not last long as first **Leonid Spirin** lowered it to 1:28:45.2 in June 1956 and then **Mikhail Lavrov** lowering it again to 1:27:58.2 in August 1956. The Soviets were expected to clean sweep the medals in the Melbourne Olympics but, surprisingly, Golubnichiy was not in the team – he remained at home with a serious inflammation of the liver which threatened to end his walking career. History shows that the Soviets still took all three medals in the 20 km walk with Spirin winning in 1:31.27.4, followed by **Antanas Mikenas** and **Bruno Junk**.

It took a long time for the young Ukrainian to fully recover from his debilitating illness but the world knew he was truly back when, in September 1958, in Simferopol, he regained his 20km world record with 1:27:05.0. He went into the 1960 Rome Olympics as the clear favourite and did not disappoint. He entered the stadium well in front and started his final lap of the track, soaking in the applause and savouring the moment. What he did not realise was that a young unknown Australian by the name of **Noel Freeman** was making big inroads into his lead and was in sight of a huge upset. Eventually Golubnichiy looked around, saw Freeman, accelerated and went on to win by 9 seconds in a time of 1:34:16.4. It had been a sweltering Rome day and the slow times did not really reflect the quality of the performances.



Golubnichiy on his way to gold in the 1960 Olympic Games (photo Getty Images)

By way of historical anecdote, Golubnichiy was perhaps lucky to win the gold, finishing with 8 cautions and 2 official warnings. By way of comparison, the next 3 finishers all had clean slates.

1960 OLYMPIC 20 KM ROADWALK																				
WALKER	NAT	PL	TIME	SULAK, CYS	McGUIRE, AUS	WHITLOCK, GBR	BASSETT, GBR	STAHL, GER	FERRUARI, UNG	GUILLEUX, FRA	LIBOLTE, SWI	LINDE, SWE	STERANENKO, URS	TOMANIN, URS	BOLLINI, ITA	CALLIGARIS, ITA	OBERLEUGER, ITA	W (WARNING)	D(DISQ)	
GOLUBNICHY, Vladimir	SOV	1	01:34:07		W	WD		W	W			WD			W	W	W		8	2
FREEMAN, Noel	AUS	2	01:34:16																	
VICKERS, Stan	GBR	3	01:34:56																	
LINDNER, Dieter	GDR	4	01:35:33																	
READ, Norman	NZL	5	01:36:59					W							D				1	1
BACK, Lennart	SWE	6	01:37:17							W						W				2
LJUNGGREN, John	SWE	7	01:37:59																	
MOC, Ladislav	CZE	8	01:38:32																	
OAKLEY	CAN	9	01:38:40																	
HALL	GBR	10	01:38:50			W								W						2
CRAWFORD, Ron	AUD	11	01:39:12			W	W						W	W						4
DELERUE	FRA	12	01:39:37			W								W						2
HAZLE	RSA	13	01:40:16										W							1
CARLSSON	SWE	14	01:40:25																	
KRISTENSEN	DEN	15	01:41:08																	
KOCH	GER	16	01:41:53												W					1
MARQUIS	SWI	17	01:42:00	D	W										W					2
SOWA	LUX	18	01:42:43											W						1
ZINN	USA	19	01:42:47																	
SINGH, Z	IND	20	01:43:20																	
SERCHENICH	ITA	21	01:43:59					W	W						WD	W				4
DEROSSO	ITA	22	01:45:04																	
MIMM	USA	23	01:45:09																	
HALUZA	USA	24	01:45:11												W					1
ROSSCHOU	DEN	25	01:46:36																	
CORSARO	ITA	26	01:46:47																	
BAROUNI	TUN	27	01:47:10																	
ZLASSI	TUN	28	01:55:21																	
MATTHEWS	GBR	DNF												D		W				1
LEFANCZIK	GER	DO		WD	D	W	W					D				W	D			4
SOLODOV	URS	DO		WD	W	W	W		D	WD	WD				WD					7
VEDYAKOV	URS	DO		WD	W	WD	W			D	WD				D	W	W			8
REYMOND	SWI	DO		D			WD								W	W	W			3
BALOGXA	HUN	DO		D	D	W				D		W	W	WD	D	WD				5
SINGH, A	IND	DO		W	D	D		W	W	W					WD					5
LAZHAR	TUN	DO		WD	W	WD	WD	W	W	D		WD	W	D	WD	WD				11

Judging summary sheet from the 1960 Olympic 20km (from Frank McGuire, the Australian rep on the judging panel)

International opportunities were few in those days, so Golubnichiy's next big race was not until 1962, when he won bronze in that year's European Champs 20km in Belgrade, the time a slow 1:36:38 in hot conditions. On that occasion, he was bettered by Great Britain's **Ken Matthews** and East Germany's **Hans-Georg Reimann**.

Golubnichiy went into the 1964 Olympics as the defending champion but all was not well. The 1964 season had been very demanding for the Soviet Union's top athletes, with frequent competitions and a long period spent in peak competitive form before the Olympics relegating them to the role of outsiders at Tokyo. This illustrates the point that even in the most highly skilled and regimented coaching regimes, mistakes can still be made. Golubnichiy's effort in the 1964 Olympic 20km event says a lot about the measure of the man. Faltering early, he fell back through the field and eventually collapsed mid race. Picking himself up, he started again and slowly things came together. He moved up through the field and eventually finished third behind Matthews and **Dieter Lindner** of East Germany. Yet this bronze medal was particularly special to him as he said it represented his victory over himself, his ability to reveal and use hitherto unknown resources of strength.

His good form continued over the next few years. He took silver in the 1966 European Championship 20km walk in Budapest (1:30:06) behind Lindner and took silver in the 1967 Lugano Cup Final in Bad Saarow (1:28:58) behind fellow Soviet **Nikolay Smaga**.

The Soviets left nothing to chance in their preparation for the 1968 Olympics, flying into Mexico City a full month before the Games Opening Ceremony, on the recommendation of their sports medicine experts. With ample time to watch the competition, it soon became clear that American **Ron Laird** looked the toughest proposition so, come the day of the Olympic 20km event, Golubnichiy chose to shadow the American and ignore the rest of the field. This was a major miscalculation as they soon found themselves at the back of the field and fast losing ground on the leaders. Both walkers had to put on a burst of speed to catch the leaders. But this came at a cost and the American soon fell back while Golubnichiy struggled in the group, trying to recover. His room mate and training partner Smaga knew what he had to do, taking the lead and controlling the race for the first 18km before helping Golubnichiy break clear of the field. The two Soviet friends entered the stadium looking certain for gold and silver.

Then the 60,000-plus spectators went wild as a third walker appeared – Mexican champion **Jose Pedraza**. 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 (one step short of a warning). But it would have taken a suicidal judge to disqualify the determined Pedraza 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.

Vic Sharpe, the Australian representative on the Olympic 20km panel confided in later years that the Mexico City 1968 Olympics was one of his most memorable judging experiences but "*I wasn't going to put a red on Pedraza - I wanted to get out of Mexico alive.*"



The famous finish – Golubnichiy looks over his shoulder with 90m to go to see Pedraza closing quickly.

In July 1969, Golubnichiy took silver in the 20km walk in the U.S.A. vs USSR vs British Commonwealth T&F Meet in Los Angeles (1:32:11.0), behind **Paul Nihill** but ahead of Laird and Smaga.

Golubnichiy was back in action in 1970, taking silver in the Lugano Cup 20km Final in Eschborn (1:27:22) behind the East German Reimann.

Fast forward to Munich in 1972. In the 20km event, it was Golubnichiy who stopped an East German clean sweep of the medals. His silver medal time of 1:26:55.2 was well under the Olympic record and only 11 seconds behind the winner **Peter Frenkel** and ahead of third placed Reimann and fourth placed **Gerhard Sperling**. The East German sports machine had been born and was now bearing the first fruits of its ruthlessly scientific sports development program. This program would continue to produce champions up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990.

The silver medal, won at the age of 36, seemed to nicely round off his sporting career, but he felt otherwise. "*Right after the medal ceremony, I went up into the stands to our fans and coaches*", wrote Golubnichiy in his diary, "*and I was congratulated, my hand shook. And suddenly I heard someone say, I'm sure without any malice, 'Congratulations, old boy, you've made a fine finish to your sporting career!'*" "



Golubnichiy toes the line at the start of the 1972 Olympic 20 km in Munich

Golubnichiy was far from finished and he astounded everyone when in 1974, in a typically blistering Rome sun, he won the European 20 km title, pushing 20 km world record holder **Bernd Kannenburg** back into second place. He followed this up with a win in the 1975 Soviet National 20 km championship in Kiev, his time an astonishing 1:23:55.0 – at 39 years of age! Given these performances, his final Olympic appearance in 1976 was disappointing – only 7th in 1:29:24.6. It was the first time in 5 Olympics that he had failed to win a medal – but he was 40 years of age after all.

His final major international was the 1977 Lugano Cup in Le Grand Quevilly, France, and he finished 14th with a time of 1:30:33.

His international resume reads impressively – 3 golds, 4 silvers and 2 bronzes from 11 races, all of them 20km.

1960	Olympic 20km	Rome	1 st	1:34:08
1962	European Champs 20km	Belgrade	3 rd	1:36:38
1964	Olympic 20km	Tokyo	3 rd	1:32:00
1966	European Champs 20km	Budapest	2 nd	1:30:06
1967	Lugano Cup	Bad Saarow	2 nd	1:28:58
1968	Olympic 20km	Mexico	1 st	1:33:59
1970	Lugano Cup	Eschborn	2 nd	1:27:22
1972	Olympic 20km	Munich	2 nd	1:26:56
1974	European Champs 20km	Rome	1 st	1:29:30
1976	Olympic 20km	Montreal	7 th	1:29:25
1977	Lugano Cup	Le Grand Quevilly	14 th	1:30:33

He was also hard to beat on the home front, in an era when the Soviets dominated racewalking. He was the Soviet 20km champion on 6 occasions, in 1960, 1964–65, 1968, 1972, and 1974.

Golubnichiy was without any doubt the greatest walker of his era and stands alongside Jared Tallent and Robert Korzenioski at the top of racewalking's hall of fame.

His accolades were many. On the Soviet front, he was awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labour (1960), the Order of the Badge of Honour (1969) and the Medal For Labour Valour (1972). Internationally, he was one of the 24 inaugural Members of the IAAF Hall of Fame which was announced in 2012 to mark the IAAF Centenary. But if he was a national hero at the Soviet level, he was a living legend and a national treasure within his native Ukraine.

In July 2009, New Zealand walker Mike Parker was lucky enough to meet with Golubnichiy in his home town of Sumy in the Ukraine. Here is part of what he had to say:

We received word from the President of the Sumy region Olympic Committee that Golubnichiy was more than happy to meet me and that arrangements had been made for me to meet him in Sumy on Monday 17th. I have to say that I am still reeling from the shock of the hospitality we received in Sumy. After spending the night in a hotel in Sumy we were escorted to the meeting with Golubnichiy, arguably, for those of you who don't the greatest race walker of all time and one of the greatest ever athletes. To my shock Golubnichiy and a contingent of press and television cameras were waiting for our arrival. To cut a long and eventful story short, what I thought would be a brief ten minutes with Vladimir turned out to be a fantastic full day in his company, and what a man he is. I don't think I have ever meet somebody who has achieved so much and is so humble. We were shown the new Vladimir Golubnichiy indoor stadium built in his honour and taken to the athletic track across town where it all began for Vladimir as a fifteen year old back in 1951. I happened to mention to Vladimir that I used to have a book on him until I lent it to someone many years ago and never got it back. A minute later Vladimir disappeared, he had jumped into his car driven home to get this book for me with a personalised inscription, in addition he gave me one of his Russian track suits.

Vladimir took us to his apartment in the city where we could not but be mightily impressed by the simplicity of his style of life, a life that has remained the same since the day he took up athletics, despite numerous attractive offers. Vladimir showed us his array of trophies and medals he has won over the years. This collection is just about to go in its entirety to the Sumy museum so that the people of Sumy, a city of 350,000 can have access to their most famous inhabitant's career rewards.

The next morning Sasha picked us up and took us out into the country to witness one of their training camps for their Biathlon team, full of Olympic hopefuls taking part. Sumy can boast over 1000 race walkers, 700 wrestlers and over 2000 Biathlon athletes. Most of this growth in sport can be put down to Vladimir Golubichiy, a legend in Sumy and Ukrainian sport.



On 17 July 2009 in Sumy, Ukraine, Mike Parker was fortunate to meet Golubnichiy. The pair are seen standing outside the recently completed Vladimir Golubnichiy indoor athletics track and sports facility.

Photo compliments of Mike Parker

Mike's comments paint a poignant picture of Golubnichiy as a humble man, generous with his time and his possessions.

Sadly, our sport has lost one of its greatest treasures.

Tim Erickson
Friday 20th August 2021