

Bob Gardiner

1964	Olympic Games	Tokyo	50 km	5 th	4:17:06
1964	Olympic Games	Tokyo	20 km	DNF	
1968	Olympic Games	Mexico	50 km	19 th	4:52:29
1970	Commonwealth Games	Edinburgh	20 Mile	2 nd	2:35:55
1972	Olympic Games	Munich	20/50 km	Withdrew from team	

Bob Gardiner, born on 22nd March 1936, started racewalking in 1953 at age 17. At 5 ft 7 inches in height and 130 lbs in weight, he was leanly built but this did not seem to disadvantage him and he was immediately successful, winning the Victorian Junior title the very next year. It was then a long haul before he hit real prominence in the senior ranks in 1961.

In that year he defeated Ted Allsopp and Harry Summers to win the Victorian Open 2 mile track walk (**14:23.0**), a title his father Bert had won four years in a row from 1928 to 1931. Then he captured his first Australian title in the 1961 National two miles championship (**14:40.2**) at Lang Park in Brisbane. This marked the start of Bob's national and international career which had many highlights including

- Selection for both the 20 km and 50 km walks in the 1964 Olympics in Tokyo. There, he retired injured at the 15 km mark in the 20 km and took 5th place in the 50 km walk in a new National record of **4:17:06**. This time was in fact a 7 minute PB.
- Selection in the 20 km racewalk in the 1967 U.S.A. versus British Commonwealth meeting
- 19th place in the 50 km walk in the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. Bob suffered badly in the heat and altitude but battled gamely to finish.
- A great second to Noel Freeman in the 20 mile walk in the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh
- Selection in the 20 km walk in the 1971 Russia V U.S.A. versus World All Stars meet.
- Selection in both the 20 km and 50 km walks in the 1972 Olympics in Munich. Unfortunately he had to withdraw from the team with a groin injury shortly before departure.

There were many exciting races between Noel Freeman, Bob Gardiner, Frank Clark and Ted Allsopp at national level during the 1960's and a great rivalry existed between Freeman and Gardiner who filled the top 2 positions in the walking hierarchy.

Bob was trained by former Olympian George Knott and advised by Frank McGuire in his early days and also drew on the innovative methods of his father Bert, an Australian 7 miles Walk Champion. The attitudes of brilliant NZ coach Arthur Lydiard were also a big influence as were the ideas of Percy Cerutti.

Although mainly a loner in training, Bob's mentor and most lasting training mate at various times from the 50's to this day has been Harry Summers. Other training groups assisted him at various stages over the years, including Ron Miller and a succession of Collingwood harriers, Gus Theobald, Clarrie and Ian Jack and the Glenhuntly group, and in later years, Betty Newman and Tom Daintry and their crew of veteran walkers.

He produced many world class times between 1960 and 1972. He was a big time performer and produced his best in the Australian Championships where he won a total of 16 medals including 8 golds. His Australian Championship wins were

1961	2 miles	14:40
1964	50 km	4:24:19
1965	2 miles	14:10
1965	20 km	1:37:23
1966	50 km	4:18:20 (fastest ever time by an Australian)
1967	3000m	12:57
1968	50 km	4:22:23
1971	50 km	4:27:57

It should be remembered that road championships in Australia were usually held on challenging hilly courses, similar, to the LBG 20 miles course. Despite this, Bob's time in 1966 compared favourably with Abdon Parnich's world record of 4:14:02.

Bob also competed in the famous Darwin 100 km Relay with Ted Allsopp and Jim Gleeson against the Army teams of seven in the 1960s.



Bob easily wins a 1966 track walk in Melbourne

A loss in the national track title in 1966 (to a young Ross Haywood) stopped Bob collecting six successive national championships. He bounced back to win the 1967 track title.

He held concurrently the Australian 2 miles, 20 km and the 50 km titles, the only Australian to hold all titles at the one time. It was not until 1977 that Willi Sawall equalled the feat.

Bob trained hard and raced hard. In 1964 as part of his Olympic buildup, he regularly clocked up training weeks of 100 miles over an extended period. In May of that year, he showed his real potential with a wonderful 40 km time of **3:22:37** at Albert Park. His splits were 51:24, 50:28, 50:16 and 50:28.

It was no surprise when he won the Olympic 50 km trial on 6 June in Adelaide in **4:24:19.2** – a time that beat the current Olympic record by some 40 seconds. His subsequent 5th place in the Tokyo 50 km (**4:17:06**) was not a once-off. It was the result of hard work and determination.

While it would take many pages to fully cover Bob's walking career which spans 50 years, it gives a glimpse into his talent and toughness to consider in detail the last few years of his international career starting with his buildup for the 1968 Olympics.

In the last race of the 1967 winter season, Bob won the Victorian 50 km in **4:19:59**. It was only a couple of minutes over his Tokyo time and signalled that his training was on target.

From there, he moved into the track season and set himself the impossible task of matching a rampant Noel Freeman. In early December, in a VAWC 3 mile handicap at Albert Park, Noel won from scratch with 20:53 while Bob recorded a PB **21:04** to be just behind him. Then later that month, Bob came second to Noel once again in two 1 mile track walks at the Tommy Smith International Track meetings at Olympic Park in Melbourne. His times were PBs of **6:38** and then **6:33**.

In any other year, this sort of form would have seen him winning everything but beating Noel was a hard ask. The Victorian 2 mile title in February was an epic battle between the two walkers. Eventually Noel got up to win in 13:44 as against Bob's time of **13:46**.

After such a good summer, people waited expectantly for the winter so see if this newly found speed would carry over to the longer distances. They did not have long to wait. In the first race of the VAWC road season, over 20 miles at Albert Park, Bob won by 13 minutes in a quick **2:33:18**.

It was no surprise to anyone when in early May, Bob won the Australian 50 km championship and Olympic trial by more than 5 minutes. The course in Toowoomba in Queensland was a tough hilly one and the race was held in bleak conditions. His time of **4:22:23** was impressive in the circumstances.



Bob, Ron Crawford and Ted Allsopp training in the Olympic Village in Tokyo, 1964

As the Olympics drew near, Bob intensified his training and racing and his final hitouts were impressive. First on August 24, in a VAWC Track 50 km event at Melbourne University, Bob won in **4:14:17**, setting new Commonwealth, Australian and Victorian records and showing that he was a dangerous dark horse for the forthcoming Olympic 50 km event. I was fortunate enough to witness that walk and I still remember the constant pace with which he ate up the 125 laps.

Then 2 weeks later, he finished 4th from a scratch start in the classic Melbourne to Frankston 25 Mile event. His time was a sensational **3:20:46** and he pulled up fresh and looked to have plenty in reserve.

He left for Mexico with high expectations but like most of us, he had no idea of the toll that the high altitude and heat would exact from his body. In the Olympic 50 km, after a good start, he gradually lost ground and faded back through the field. His last 10 km was walked in the semi darkness with people wandering across the course. His 19th place in **4:52:29** was a disappointment but still a gutsy effort.

Bob had a quiet summer before starting his next buildup which was hopefully going to culminate in Edinburgh with the 1970 Commonwealth Games 20 mile walk. His campaign did not start with great fanfare as he came a distant third in the 1969 Australian 20 km which was held in Centennial Park in Sydney in May. Frank Clark won in 91:56 with Noel Freeman second in 92:37. Bob was a distant third in **1:38:07**.

But then Bob hit his straps and it all started to come together. He had the benefit of chasing Noel Freeman who was also intent on a Commonwealth Games berth. Bob was a close second to Noel in the Victorian 10 km road walk in **45:09**. Then in early June, he came second to Noel again in the Victorian 10 Mile track walk at Melbourne University track. Noel won in 73:32 while Bob was second in **1:15:03**.

Three weeks later, Bob was again second to Noel in the Victorian 20 km title. While Noel won in a new race record time of 1:30:48, Bob was second in a PB time of **1:31:14**.

On July 20, a special 20 mile track trial was put on at the Melbourne University Track to allow Noel and Bob the chance to attack the existing records. It proved a triumph for Noel who set new Commonwealth, Australian and Victorian records for both 30 km (2:23:08) and 20 Miles (2:33:54). His time on the wet slow cinders track beat the

existing Commonwealth records by some 2 minutes. For Bob it was a disappointing day as he dropped off the pace at the 10 mile mark and retired at 18 miles.

But then in a reversal of form, in early August, Bob won a VAWC 7 Mile event at Albert Park in a PB of **50:01** with Noel second in 51:56. It was a rare victory for Bob over Noel. It signalled something special that was not long in coming.

On August 30, the Commonwealth Games 20 mile trial was held at Albert Park. A large field of 33 starters faced the gun but all eyes were focused on Noel, Frank Clark and Bob, with Noel expected to fight out the honours with Frank. But it was Bob who powered through the first 10 miles in 76:43 before speeding up to 74:53 for the second half. His final time of **2:31:36.6** was only 3.6 seconds outside the World Track Record held by Russian walker Vedjakov. Although he had done PBs over all distances during the winter, he had been generally overshadowed by Noel. But Bob's fighting ability over the longer distances proved to be the winning asset on this occasion. Noel took second in 2:34:17, just outside his track record. Frank Clark was third in a distance 2:39:24.

With his Commonwealth Games selection now confirmed, Bob had one final race for the winter before returning to training mode. In late September, he won the Victorian 50 km championship on a hot and sunny 87° day. Conditions were so tough that although his time was a slow **4:42:08**, he won by some 5 miles!

After another good summer on the track, he won the Victorian 2 mile track walk in **14:02**. It was his 6th victory in this event. Then he was second to Frank Clark in the National 3000m title to confirm his position amongst the premier track walkers.

Come the winter and it was a repeat of 1968 as Noel and Bob went to battle once more. And like 1968, it was Noel who seemed to have the edge in pure speed.

The closeness of the two walkers was illustrated in early June when in the Victorian 10 Mile Track title at Melbourne University in "cold cold conditions" they put on one of the fastest displays of sustained walking ever seen in Australia. The lead changed several times during the race before Noel eventually won out in 1:11:46 to Bob who recorded a PB of **1:11:53**.

A week later, in a 20 Mile trial race at Albert Park, cold and wet conditions greeted the 8 starters. Noel, with 5 mile splits of 37:04, 36:28, 36:28 and 38:02, clocked 2:28:02, a time more than 3 minutes under the existing track world record and beating Bob's 1968 world best time of 2:31:36. Bob was blown away and finished a long way back in **2:38:23**.

Two weeks later in the Victorian 20 km title at Albert Park, Noel won in 1:31:24 with Bob second in **1:32:07**. Then in early July, another long preparation race was held at Albert Park. This time it was a 30 km walk but good times were not expected with the Heel and Toe commenting that "*the road awash with icy winds made good times impossible for most*". Bob and Noel fought it out for 20 km (1:31:43) before Noel once again got the upper hand to win in 2:18:41 with Bob second in **2:20:59**.

For Bob it was a year of great walking yet there must have been some frustration as he was consistently forced into second place by Australia's most talented ever walker. It was no surprise to anyone when in the July Commonwealth Games 20 mile walk in Edinburgh, the two Victorians were in a class of their own, easily outwalking the opposition. Noel won in 2:33:33 and Bob was second in **2:35:55**. Local Scottish walker Bill Sutherland was third in 2:37:24.

After his great 2nd place in the 1970 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh, Bob won the 1971 Australian 50 km title and Olympic trial (**4:27:57**) and was selected for both the 20 km and 50 km events in the 1972 Olympics in Munich. With Noel now retired, he was our sole Olympic representative in what must have been a daunting assignment.

In the final weeks before the team was due to leave for Europe, there were two key withdrawals due to injury - team captain and marathoner John Farrington and Bob. In Bob's case, a groin injury had flared up at just the wrong time. This disappointment (it would have been Bob's third Olympic appearance) forced Bob to reappraise his career and he decided it was time to retire from top level competition.

From then on, he restricted his racing to interclub competition. It was not until the veteran movement grew that he resumed any serious training. In his 55th year he showed he was still capable of world class times in his age division by setting world veteran 5,000m and 20 km records at the Australian Veteran Championships. At the time of writing, he is still an active walker and is in his fiftieth year as a competitor. This is an amazing achievement.

Apart from his outstanding career as an athlete, Bob has been a constant supporter of the VRWC. Starting as club Vice Captain (1961-65), he progressed to club Captain (1966-72) before becoming Social Secretary (1973-75). He has been continuously on the club committee ever since and is currently Junior Vice President.

His services to the club were recognised with a life membership award in 1987 (he is also a life member of Collingwood Harriers). His many contributions to the club are too numerous to mention. Even now, he helps with race day setup, helps the ladies in the canteen, looks after the club equipment, maintains the honour boards, oversees club uniforms, performs general maintenance, does a great amount of general club liason and even finds time to compete in the regular club races.

The next time you front up against Bob in a club race at Albert Park or at the Box Hill track, stop to think about his wonderful achievements and think yourself privileged to be sharing the same track with him.