

## *Noel Freeman*

1960	Olympic Games	Rome	20 km	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1:34:16
1960	Olympic Games	Rome	50 km	DQ	
1964	Olympic Games	Tokyo	20 km	4 <sup>th</sup>	1:32:06
1970	Commonwealth Games	Edinburgh	20 Miles	1 <sup>st</sup>	2:33:33

Noel Freeman born on 24<sup>th</sup> December 1938, started racewalking in 1955 at the age of 16. Of height 5 ft 10 ins and weighing 149 lbs, he was a powerful walker who showed immense talent at an early age.

A member of Footscray Harriers, he was trained by Percy Cerutti and this showed out in his attitudes to training and living. He was a great believer in developing upper body strength by weight or body resistance exercises and felt that upper body strength developed power walking. His training mixed walking and running and was intense in nature.

He burst into prominence with Victorian and Australian Junior records over all distances from 5 miles to 2 hours in the famous 2 hour race in Melbourne on 22 Sept 1956 in which Ted Allsopp broke the World 2 Hour walking record. Noel's 20 km time of **1:36:47** put him amongst the top seniors of the day and he was only 17 years of age!

In fact, his 20 km time was nearly 1 minute faster than Ron Crawford had done only weeks before in coming third in the 1956 Olympic Trial. There was some discussion about whether Freeman or Crawford should be awarded the third Olympic 20 km walk berth but the selectors went with Ron and Noel had to wait a further 4 years for his chance.

He was forced to play second fiddle to Ted Allsopp during the next 2 years as Ted won everything on offer. But by 1959, he was starting to win the big ones and force Ted back to second place over the prestigious 20 km distance. He won the 1959 Victorian title in **1:33:29** and the 1960 Victorian title in **1:31:05**.

Noel obviously wanted to do the Olympic double so he also tested himself out over the 50 km distance, taking silvers behind Ted in the 1958 Australian 50 km (**4:31:15**) and in the 1959 Victorian 50 km (**4:30:06**).

The Olympic 20 km trial was scheduled for 7 May 1960 in Centennial Park in Sydney and Noel made no mistakes, storming through the first 10 km in **41:39** before slowing to win in **92:12.4**. Ted chased him early but paid the penalty and faded to third behind Ron Crawford of NSW.

The Olympic 50 km trial was held on 5 June 1960 in Mentone (Melbourne) and Noel comfortably won in **4:32:28**. Ted, the perennial favourite, lost contact at the 20 km mark and retired soon after the 30 km mark.



Noel Freeman (2) in the early stages of the 1960 Olympic 50 km. Also shown in the picture are Ron Crawford (2) and Norm Reid (7).

At 21 years of age, Noel had been selected for both the Olympic 20 km and the 50 km walks.

Noel raced the Olympic 20 km in the same way he had attacked the trial. Immensely self confident, he strode straight to the front and hung on grimly as the Russians forced the pace. With three miles to go, the eventual winner Golubnichky and another Russian were more than a minute ahead of him when he started a fantastic surge and, at the end, he was only 35 yards (9.4 secs) behind the Russian. His 2<sup>nd</sup> place (**1:34:16**) made him Australia's most successful ever walker. In retrospect Noel felt he could have won if he had received detailed information in the last few miles – he had not known just how close he was to Golubnichky until it was too late. The judging summary sheet showed that Golubnichky had 2 reports and 8 cautions while Noel had a clean slate.

In the 50 km event, Noel walked just as aggressively, going to the lead from the start with compatriot Ron Crawford. Controversially, they were both disqualified before the 20 km mark while still leading. Given Noel's clean judging sheet in the 20 km event, his disqualification in the 50 km remains a discussion point. In the bitter aftermath (he felt he could have won the 50 km), the future direction of his career was perhaps set to be one dogged by controversy.

Noel only raced intermittently during the next two years as Bob Gardiner, Ted Allsopp and a young Peter McCullagh turned up the heat. Typical of the track battles of the time was an interclub race on 24 January 1962 over the 1 mile distance – Freeman **6:40.6**, Gardiner 6:47, McCullagh 6:47 and Allsopp 6:49. This was noted as the fastest track race ever in Australia.

His long term focus remained on a rematch in the Tokyo Olympics and the 1963 season saw him embark on his first serious winter since Rome. A 5 mile time of **35:51** in May was a good omen but he was then disqualified in the Victorian 20 km roadwalk when well in front (Peter McCullagh duly won). Life had its ups and downs. When in August 1963, McCullagh went to England as a Rhode Scholarship holder, the competitive pressure eased a bit but Noel was never one to worry about pressure and he raced from the front regardless of whom he was against.

After another good summer on the track, he started the winter season with a promising win in the Victorian 10,000 track walk with **43:44.6**, only 6 seconds outside Don Keane's 1956 record. But under the covers, all was not well. He owned and ran his own milkbar in Richmond and spent the day on his feet, sometimes being forced to train late in the evening after the shop closed. He had plenty of speed but lacked fitness.

When in July, he won the 20 km Olympic trial in **1:34:20**, it was done the hard way. He raced from the front as usual, passing the first 10 km in **42:30**. But then he started to cramp and struggled home to just outlast a fast finishing Ron Crawford who finished only 30 seconds in arrears. His second 20 km Olympic berth was now booked but there was no way he could walk a 50 km trial on his current fitness. He would contest only one walk in Tokyo.

The team announcement included a requirement that all members attend a 16 day Narrabeen training camp prior to embarkation. Noel wrote to the President of the A.A.U. of Australia requesting exemption – he had no need to prove his fitness and he had a business to run. The exemption was not forthcoming and Noel's Olympic campaign looked in jeopardy.

On August 15, Noel won a 20 Mile roadwalk at Albert Park in a wonderful time of **2:35:02**, some 3:14 under his Australian record - a winning margin of 21 minutes in cold windy conditions. Two weeks later on August 27, he won again, this time at the Melbourne University track, in a special VAWC 20 mile time trial. He set new Australian records for the 30 km (**2:25:02**) and 20 mile (**2:37:47**) distances.

The next week, the news of his standoff over the Narrabeen camp burst into the open when the daily press learned of the situation and gave it wide publicity. The A.A.U. quickly backed down and granted Noel a partial exemption – he would now be required to only attend the final 6 days of the camp.

In his second Olympic 20 km in Tokyo, he was only seconds behind the great Golubnichy but was fourth on this occasion (**1:32:06**). This cemented his spot in Australian Olympic History as the highest credentialed Australian walker ever.

Noel seemed to be dogged by controversy. The following extract from the Heel & Toe magazine, dated 3 February 1965, speaks for itself.

*In a sensational Victorian 2 mile walk championship last Saturday, Noel Freeman lost his title in circumstances which had the crowd buzzing with excitement. Although disqualified well before the finish, Noel refused to leave the track and continued on the reach the finish 20 yards ahead of fellow Olympian Bob Gardiner, who was declared the winner. When questioned by press reporters as to why he failed to obey the rules of the race, Noel replied he wanted to gain selection in the State team to contest the National championships in Hobart. Noel's action could well jeopardise his chances of selection in the official team, as several recent skirmishes with officialdom have no doubt damaged his chances of being excused from this latest breach. In the interests of*

*racewalking in Australia, it is hoped these misdemeanours will not prevent this fine athlete taking his place in the Victorian team for Hobart. However, the administration can only tolerate so much abuse from competitors and Noel must surely be 'walking on thin ice'.*

Luckily Noel was still selected in the Victorian team but subsequently suffered a rare track defeat in Hobart at the hands of fellow Olympian Bob Gardiner. Bob won by 6 seconds in 14:10 while Noel had to call on all his reserves to hold out NSW youngster Frank Clark (14:16.6 to 14:16.8). This was the start of a fierce rivalry between Noel and Frank. In fairness to Noel, he had spent the last few months building his new home and was down on fitness.

Over the next few years, he seemed to prefer distance running and steeplechasing with the Footscray club. It was not until mid-1967 that he decided to again try his hand at race walking and, training twice a day over 12 miles, he was back in top form by the end of the year.

On December 6 in a VAWC 3 mile handicap at Albert Park, he won from scratch with **20:53** beating Bob Gardiner who recorded 21:04 to be just behind him.

A week later at the first of two Tommy Smith International Track Meetings at Olympic Park, he won the Mile walk in **6:32** with Bob second in 6:38. Then 2 days later in the second Tommy Smith International Track Meeting, he again won the 1 mile walk in an even faster time of **6:27** and Bob was again second in 6:33.

Coming back after the Christmas competition break on January 20 at an Interclub event at Melbourne, Noel recorded **13:24.4** for the 2 Mile walk to break Don Keane's 12 year old Australian record. 11 days later he followed this up with the greatest sprint walk ever by an Australian to record **13:11** for the 2 mile distance on the road at Albert Park. This was followed soon after by an amazing road time of **20:15** for 3 miles

February 1968 saw Noel and Bob stage an epic battle in the Victorian 2 mile track title. Noel got up to win in **13:44** as against Bob's time of 13:46. Then in March, Noel won the Victorian 10000m track title in **44:02** in hot and humid conditions.

At the Australian Track and Field titles in Sydney, Noel withheld a last minute sprint by Frank Clark of NSW to regain his Australian 3000m track title. Noel's time of **12:39.6** was a new State record but Frank's time of 12:41.6 indicated that he was also in great form and preparing well for the forthcoming Olympic 20 km trial.

Three weeks later on April 6, Noel took another step towards his Olympic selection with a phenomenal **1:29:12** in winning a VAWC 20 km event. He walked with blistered heels from the 2 mile mark and was under 7 minute mile pace for the first 6 miles before slowing. It was the fastest 20 km time in the world for 1967-68. It was faster than the winning time in both the 1960 and 1964 Olympics and another Olympic selection seemed assured.

But the win came at a cost – his blistered feet were slow to recover and it was only four weeks until the Olympic trial on May 4 at Centennial Park in Sydney. He could not race at all till April 29 when he got through a painful 5 mile VAWC club championship which he won in **35:05**.

The unthinkable then happened in the trial a week later – Noel was disqualified after only 3 laps by the all NSW panel of judges. He refused to leave the track and finished about 1 minute ahead of Frank Clark whose winning time was a course record 91:39. But Noel's finish was a token on his part – Olympic selection was awarded to Clark. Thus ensued one of the ugliest media frenzies we have seen in Australia. Noel was adamant he had been 'robbed' and many highly placed people backed him – people like Herb Elliot. Even the A.A.U backed him and they appealed his exclusion from the team.

He kept training and showed that he was still on track with a win in the Victorian 10 km road championship on June 1. His time was **45:17**.

Four weeks later he was ready for his 20 km 'trial'. He led the field from the start and, in icy winds and bitter conditions, recorded a world class time of **1:31:34**, 5 seconds faster than Frank Clark had recorded in his Sydney trial win. He received only 1 caution and chief judge Jack Larkin confirmed that his style was up to international standard and would not cause disqualification at international contests. The race was watched by a surprise spectator, the secretary of the Australian Olympic Federation, Sir Edgar Tanner. One of the first to congratulate Noel after the race, Sir Edgar pointed to the 1964 Tokyo Olympic tracksuit he was holding and said: *"It looks as though you'll be getting another one of those."*

Yet amazingly, at a closed AOF meeting later in July, Noel's case was once again dismissed. He was left at home while the great Golubnichy recorded his third straight Olympic 20 km win – we can never know if Noel would have finally won his 'Gold' but a review of his form indicates he would have been in there with a good show.

It must be said at this stage that Frank Clark was a worthy Australian representative and it is unfortunate that his justifiable selection was perhaps undervalued a little in the aftermath of this unfortunate affair.

He had one last chance for selection – a verbal assurance that if he won the Victorian Title at Albert Park on Saturday 30 June, wasn't disqualified for 'lifting' and recorded a world class time, he would be considered for inclusion in the team.



**Noel Freeman finishes his famous 'last chance' 1968 VRWC 20 km race. Bert Gardiner and Alf Robinson are timekeeping.**

It is a measure of Noel's own personal determination that he refused to let his career end at this point. He was not yet ready to retire and the 1970 Commonwealth Games 20 Mile beckoned.

Little was seen of him for the rest of 1968 nor in the ensuing track season. But on 17 May 1969, the Australian 20 km road title was held in Centennial Park in Sydney and Noel was a starter. Frank Clark won in 1:31:56 with Noel second in **1:32:37**. It was a good start to his next campaign.

A week later he won the Victorian 10 km road title in **45:06**, narrowly edging out Bob Gardiner who was 3 seconds in arrears. Noel was back! From then on the wins came in quick succession. On June 7, he won the Victorian 10 Mile track walk at Melbourne University track in **1:13:32** and 3 weeks later he won the Victorian 20 km in cool windy conditions in a new race record time of **1:30:48**. On all three occasions Bob Gardiner was breathing down his neck.

On 20 July a special 20 Mile Track Trial was put on at the Melbourne University Track to allow them both 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.

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 focussed on Noel, Frank Clark and Bob, Noel being 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 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 distant 2:39:24. So Bob and Noel gained selection for the Commonwealth Games and Frank Clark stayed at home.

The Commonwealth Games were not to be held until July 1970 so Noel had nearly 12 months to wait. He went back into training mode and little was seen of him for many months. He then exploded into the record books again on 12 March 1970 at an International Track meeting at Olympic Park where he won the 2 mile walk in **13:14.4**, breaking his own National record.

Yet surprisingly, on 21 March in the National 3000m title walk in Adelaide, it was a young Graeme Nicholls who outsprinted Noel in 12:56.2 as against Noel's time of **12:57.8**. It was a rare track defeat for Noel.

As the winter season started, it was once again a Freeman – Gardiner affair with the two pushing each other to new heights. As in 1969, it was Noel who led the way. He won the Victorian 10000m track title in April at Melbourne University in **44:47** and then in May won a VAWC 10 mile handicap event in a fast **1:12:19**.

Then on June 6, 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, 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 1969 world best time of 2:31:36. Bob was blown away and finished a long way back in 2:38:23.

Two weeks later, he won the Victorian 20 km title at Albert Park in **1:31:24** with Bob second in 1:32:07.

A week later on July 4, Noel and Bob had their last hitout before leaving for Edinburgh. This time it was a 30 km walk at Albert Park 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.

The Commonwealth Games 20 mile event was a fait accompli. In cool and windy conditions, 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.

Noel then announced his intention to try again for the Munich Olympic team and duly won the 1970 Australian 20 km title in **1:30:27** in Adelaide. However he was reported for misbehaviour at the awards ceremony after the event and was suspended for 13 months by the V.A.A.A. board. The 13 months suspension meant that he would miss the selection trials for the 1972 Olympics by a month! It was obvious that the extra month suspension was for no other reason than that. He appealed to A.A.U of A. but they dismissed his appeal. He had no further recourse for redress.

Thus ended the career of our greatest male walker ever – in controversy.

Noel must be rated as possibly our finest ever male walker. His Olympic Silver medal, his Commonwealth Games Gold medal, his numerous Commonwealth and Australian records, his world best road time for 20 miles, his dominance on both track and road and his 8 National Title wins are an extraordinary tribute to his talent and fighting spirit. He had a never die attitude that would not admit defeat or give in to adversity.