

Ross Haywood

1974	Commonwealth Games	Christchurch	20 Miles	7 th	2:50:56
1976	Olympic Games	Montreal	20 km	12 th	1:30:59

Ross Haywood, born 18th February 1947, was equally at home walking and running on the track and road and the pull between these two vastly different disciplines featured throughout his career.

He joined the Victorian Walkers Club as a 15 year old in 1962 and was first noted as winning a 6 mile handicap walk in 55:16 as an outmarker. On that occasion, he also won the style award. He was not afraid of distances and, even in this first season, he completed the St Kilda to Chelsea 15 mile walk in 2:34:33, again as the outmarker. From these inauspicious beginnings, he soon started to make the headlines.

His win in the 1963 Victorian Junior 1 Mile track walk (**7:06.5**) broke the Victorian Sub Junior record by 15.7 secs. In May 1963, he broke 40 minutes for the 5 mile walk (**39:34**), a tough standard in those days. In June, while coming 6th in the Victorian Open 10,000m trackwalk, he broke 3 further State Sub Junior records – 5000m in **25:11**, 5 miles in **41:14.0** and 10,000m in **51:24.0**. That same year, he finished 6th in the Victorian 10 mile track title in **84:48** (2 further records) and in the Victorian 20 km walk title in **1:44:53**.

The next few seasons should have seen Ross rewriting the record books but his walk appearances were intermittent and his running took centre stage. It was not until March 1965 that he next turned walking heads. In an interclub 1 mile walk at Olympic Park, he pursued Bob Gardiner for all 4 laps on the cinders to record a time of **6:47**, only 1.5 seconds outside Noel Freeman's Australian Junior record.

The rest of 1965 saw a succession of great performances, both walking and running. On the running front, he won the Victorian Junior 5000m cross country championship and set a new Australian Junior steeplechase record of **9:22.0**. On the walking front, he continued to break the Victorian Junior records and improved his 20 km time to **1:37:28**.

In January 1966, he recorded **6:39.0** for a 1 mile walk at Olympic Park in Melbourne, breaking Noel Freeman's Australian Junior 1 mile record and breaking Don Keane's Australian Junior 1500m record along the way with **6:11.4**. Then the next month, a few days after his 19th birthday, he captured the Australian 3,000m title (**13:20**) ahead of Bob Gardiner and Don Keane. It was the first of seven national track titles that would enable him to share with Don Keane the record of seven Australian track championships.

Surprisingly, Ross was largely absent from the 1966 winter walking season and in February 1967 he dropped a further bombshell – he would be leaving for 3 months 'jackarooing' in northern NSW and would miss the State and National track titles.

He duly returned in May 1967 and seemed little the worse for his time off – he won the Victorian 10 km in **46:52** and the Victorian 20 km in **1:34:24**. But his walking remained spasmodic and he turned to steeplechasing, with immediate success.

He surprised his opponents at the 1969 Australian steeplechase title, finishing third behind Kerry O'Brien, the 1966 Commonwealth Games silver medallist, and Tony Maning, winner of the 1970 Commonwealth Games title.

In 1970 at the Commonwealth Games trial and National championship, Ross finished second to Kerry O'Brien in Adelaide. His subsequent omission from the 1970 Commonwealth Games team (only Maning and O'Brien were selected) disappointed him and he again returned to race walking.

He came back with renewed vigour after a 3 year absence and Australian track titles flowed freely after he defeated Steve Hausefeld to win the 1971 3,000m championship (**12:59.2**) in Brisbane.

It was the first of 6 successive Australian track championship victories. By 1976 when Ross defeated Willi Sawall, he had equalled Don Keane's record of seven Australian track titles. His winning performances were as follows

1966 (**13:20**), 1971 (**12:59**), 1972 (**12:44**), 1973 (**12:52**), 1974 (**12:55**), 1975 (**12:49**), 1976 (**12:17**).

These performances were matched by 6 Victorian 3000m championship victories between 1971 and 1976.

Now that Ross was concentrating on his walking, the openings came. Bob Gardiner, Noel Freeman and Ted Allsopp had all retired by 1973 and the mantle was there for the taking. He finished third in the 1974 Commonwealth Games 20 mile trial (**2:43:00**) behind Peter Fullager and Ian Hodkinson and finally this incredibly versatile athlete had gained selection in a national team. He subsequently finished 7th in **2:50:56** behind Fullager and Hodkinson in the Games in New Zealand.



Ross (296) in the early stages of a Melbourne Interclub competition in January 1978. From the left, the walkers are Joe Anderson, Graham Dent, Ross, Tim Erickson, David Smith and Willi Sawall.

With new found confidence, he kicked on through 1975 and set his sights on the 1976 Olympics. The 20 km selection trial was held at Fishermans Bend in Melbourne on 4 April 1976 and he was an easy winner in **1:30:31**. Now he had earned a second International vest. With the selection under his belt, he recorded his best ever 10,000m walk in the Victorian title at the Box Hill track with a time of **43.51**. Yet on that occasion he was beaten by newcomer Willi Sawall whose 43:36 was a new Victorian record.

His Olympic walk was impressive. At the 5 km mark he was back in 30th spot in 22:50 but by the half way mark, he had improved to 20th. From there, he improved his position even further to eventually finish 12th (out of 38 finishers) in **1:30:59**, thus cementing his place as an international standard walker. Perhaps with a faster start and greater confidence, he might even have finished higher.



Ross warms up before the 1976 Olympic 20 km walk with English walker Paul Nihill

Perhaps in recognition of his running expertise, he was also added as a third runner in the Olympic marathon team (Dave Chettle and Chris Wardlaw were the other two) and became the only athlete ever to compete in both a walking and a running event at the same Olympics. He did not finish the marathon (he passed the 20 km mark in 1:06:49 and dropped out not long afterwards) but that did not really matter – that was purely the icing on the cake.

He retired from serious training to concentrate on his business in 1978 at the age of 31, although he continued to compete in the occasional major event on limited training. If he had remained in the sport for a little while longer, the prospect of Lugano Cup teams may have changed his mind.

Ross now owns a successful sports business in Melbourne.