

## *Willi Sawall*

1976	IAAF World Champs	Malmö	50 km	22 <sup>nd</sup>	4:18:27
1978	Commonwealth Games	Edmonton	30 km	2 <sup>nd</sup>	2:22:58
1979	Racewalking World Cup	Eschborn	50 km	10 <sup>th</sup>	3:51:08
1980	Olympic Games	Moscow	50 km	8 <sup>th</sup>	4:08:25
1981	Racewalking World Cup	Valencia	50 km	DNF	
1982	Commonwealth Games	Brisbane	30 km	4 <sup>th</sup>	2:15:23
1983	IAAF World Champs	Helsinki	20 km	30 <sup>th</sup>	1:28:16
1984	Olympic Games	Los Angeles	20 km	16 <sup>th</sup>	1:28:24
1984	Olympic Games	Los Angeles	50 km	DNF	
1985	Racewalking World Cup	Isle of Man	50 km	11 <sup>th</sup>	4:06:38
1986	Commonwealth Games	Edinburgh	30 km	5 <sup>th</sup>	2:14:29
1987	IAAF World Champs	Rome	50 km	26 <sup>th</sup>	4:14:25

Willi Sawall, born 7<sup>th</sup> November 1941, migrated to Australia as a child and started athletics at 12, as a sprinter. He moved to distance events and by 1970 he was the Victorian country marathon champion.

Fortunately for race walking a persistent hamstring injury and tendon problems caused a temporary retirement and prevented his continuing participation in marathons. Ballarat's captain Bruce McClure suggested walking, primarily for therapy but also as an alternative discipline to retain his fitness. In desperation he took the advice and went on to rewrite the Australian walking record book and became one of Australia's greatest walkers.

He commenced race walking in 1974 at Ballarat and in 1975 joined the Victorian Walkers Club. He quickly mastered the technique and by August 1975 surprised Australia's walking fraternity by recording a **1:36:03** 20 km time. Within five weeks, Sawall gave further notice of his potential by capturing his first Victorian title. In January he shocked his opponents finishing only 21 seconds behind Ross Haywood (1:32:05) in the Walkers Club 20 km.

"*Who is this athlete?*" was the question being asked outside Victoria? He had come from obscurity to become one of our top walkers in two years. Sawall revolutionized walking in Australia with his aggressive, powerful style.

Haywood and Sawall finished in that order in the 1975/76 AAU 20 km rankings and in the 3 km rankings (Haywood 12:17 and Sawall 12:38).

Willi contested the 1976 Olympic 20 km trial in April but was disqualified. It was just a month too early in his career. From then on, he was untouchable. In the ensuing 1976 winter season, he won the Victorian 10,000m track title in a new Australian record of **43:36**, the Victorian 30 km (**2:23:30**), 15 km (**1:07:34**), 20 km (equalled Noel Freeman's Australian best time of **1:29:12**), the VRWC club 50 km (an Australian best of **4:12:20**), the LBG 20 miles title (**2:33:29**) and finally won a track 50 km walk at the Glenhuntly track in **4:06:39.0** for a new Commonwealth record.

With these performances he would have been a certainty for the 1976 Olympic 50 km, but the Olympic Games Organising Committee dropped the 50 km event from the 1976 Games.

The IAAF continued to recognise the 50 km as a major event and held a world walking championship over that distance at Malmö, Sweden in 1976 so at least he had some sort of compensation for missing out on Olympic selection. In that event, he finished a creditable 22<sup>nd</sup> in **4:18:27**, just ahead of Tim Erickson. In that race, he paid the penalty for his long season of intense racing and was off his best.

From then on, Willi was undisputed champion over all distances in Australia. He won the Australian 3000m track title 5 times in a row from 1977 to 1982, won the Australian 20 km titles in 1976, 1978 and 1982 and won the Australian 50 km title in 1977, 1981 and 1986. No one could match his mixture of sheer aggression, speed and stamina.

He won the 1978 Commonwealth Games Selection trial in **2:19:25**, breaking his best time by over 2 minutes and well clear of any other Commonwealth competitors. He was ranked number 1 in the athletics team selected for the Edmonton Commonwealth Games and was perhaps Australia's most probable athletics gold medal. But another winter season of hard racing and convincing wins in all the major titles took its toll and he was below peak form for the most important race of the year. In very hot conditions and after a great battle with British walker Olly Flynn, he faded to second in **2:22:28**. While it was still a very good walk, it was nonetheless a disappointing result for Willi.

He bounced back in 1979 and asserted his position as Australia's top walker over all distances with new Australian records over 1500m (**5:33.8**), 3 km (**12:02.3**) and 10 km (**43:35.8**)

He beat two outstanding young juniors Mike Woods and Bill Dyer at the 1979 national track championship, won his fourth successive LBG 20 miles title, won the Federation 20 km title in which he beat David Smith and won the Australian versus New Zealand match.

He won the 1979 Lugano Cup trial, beating Tim Erickson and John Sheard in Australian record time (**3:56:07**), becoming the first Australian to break the four-hour barrier. It was just 24 years since Hellyer, Waddell, Jim Short and Eric Kirby had broken the five-hour barrier.

It was a tremendous break through in world rankings for Australia. Willi, with his hard training and aggressive approach, was responsible for the phenomenal improvement in the 1980s. In the next decade Dave Smith, Simon Baker, Andrew Jachno, Sue Cook and Kerry Saxby were placed in world or Commonwealth Games.

Australia sent 12 athletes in our first team to compete in the Lugano and Eschborn Cups. Sawall, Erickson, Sheard and Sockhill in the 50 km; Dave Smith, John Smith, Rod Huxley and Peter Fullager in the 20 km; Sue Cook, Sally Pierson, Lorraine Young and Karen Iselin in the 5 km.



**Willi Sawall competes in the 1979 Lugano Cup 50 km trial. Pictured from left to right are Tim Erickson, Clarrie Jack, Bruce Cook, Willi, John Sheard and Peter Vysma.**

In Germany, Willi reduced the Australian 50 km best time to **3:51:08**, in the Lugano Cup final, for 10<sup>th</sup> place. Finally on his third international walk, had put it all together and walked up to his true potential.

In Sydney at the 1980 National track 3,000m championships, Willi clocked **11:32** to retain his title for the fourth consecutive year. He followed this with a fine win in April 1980 in the Olympic 50 trial in Adelaide. His time of **3:46:34** broke his previous best and he was rated an Olympic medal chance.

He was never one to rest on his laurels and continued to race hard and fast through the winter. He won the Victorian 30 km title in another PB (**2:10:11**) and won the Victorian 12 km teams race in an amazing **49:18**. His victory in the Canberra 20mile in June was devastating – his time of **2:16:48** stood as the best time until finally broken by Jared Tallent in 2007 – not even the likes of Simon Baker, Nick A'Hern, Dion Russell or Nathan Deakes were able to approach it. It was perhaps his greatest performance in a long career of great performances.

But he paid a price for these superb performances – a torn groin muscle. This effectively ruined any medal chances in Moscow and his Olympic performance was a big disappointment to him. A cortisone injection enabled him to start and he led early but faded to 15<sup>th</sup> before rallying to a final place of 8<sup>th</sup> in **4:08:25**.

By 1981, he was being challenged by a young and equally aggressive Dave Smith and over the next few years, titanic battles raged on the track and road. But Dave was the youngster and Willi was by this stage approaching 40 years of age. Although Willi was still improving, Dave was improving at a faster rate and eventually the tables turned.

Although still troubled by his groin injury, Willi fronted for the 1981 winter season, won the Canberra 20 miler again (his fifth in succession) and then turned his thought to the upcoming Lugano Cup. Dave won the 1981 Lugano Cup 20 km trial in Adelaide in July 1981 in 1:23:31 while Willi was 2<sup>nd</sup> in **1:25:56**, a PB. Then Willi bounced back and won the Australian 50 km title at Fishermans Bend in Melbourne 2 weeks later in **3:53:55**.



**Willi Sawall leads the walkers from the Stadium in the 1980 Olympic 50 km walk.**

Off to Valencia for yet another international but once again trouble struck. The 50 km was held in hot conditions on a course that included changing surfaces (competitors had to walk 400m on a new tartan track every 2.5 km). Willi was unable to hold up under these conditions and retired due to shin soreness at around the 35 km mark, when in approximately 12<sup>th</sup> place.

As 1982 started, Willi was back into shape again and won the VAWC Christmas 20 km in **1:26:55**. This was then followed by a win in the Victorian 10 km walk in **41:17**, another PB.

He took extended long service leave and committed himself fully to walking. As the winter season started, he moved up a notch and had his most convincing winter ever, with winning performances that included the Victorian 15 km (**1:04:55**), VAWC 10 km handicap (**40:53**), Victorian 30 km (**2:08:00.4**), VAWC 10 km (**40:04**), Canberra 20 miles (**2:18:18**), Victorian 20 km (**1:21:36**), Australian 20 km in Brisbane (**1:29:02**), VAWC 10 km (**40:44**), Commonwealth Games 30 km trial (**2:08:28**) and AFRWC 10 km in Richmond, NSW (**40:04**),

With his 2 outstanding 30 km times and his similar split in the Canberra 20miles, he had the 3 top ranking times in the Commonwealth and he was once again an unbackable favourite. But once again, it was a case of a great season followed by a disappointing finale. Willi was once again nursing injuries in Brisbane and, although leading for the first half of the race in typical fashion, he had to lower his colours to Steve Barry of England, coming 4<sup>th</sup> in **2:15:23**.

A hamstring injury in 1983 prevented him defending his Canberra 20 mile title and Dave Smith was able to clean up in his absence. Willi had a quiet year by his standard, winning only one state title, the Victorian 15 km roadwalk. He was nevertheless selected to compete in the IAAF World Championships in Helsinki and he finished 30<sup>th</sup> in **1:28:16**.

When Willi won a place in the 1986 Commonwealth Games team (he was 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Canberra trial in **2:12:34**), he became the only Australian to have competed in 5 Olympic and Commonwealth Games. He followed up his fine walk in the trial with yet another win in the Canberra 20 mile event in **2:26:26** before recording a fine 5<sup>th</sup> in **2:14:29** in

Edinburgh. This was followed by yet another National title – the 50 km in **3:59:48**. At 44 years of age, Willi was still capable of breaking 4 hours for the 50 km event!

In 1987, the World Veteran titles were held in Melbourne and Willi Sawall, competing in the M45 section, won overall in the 20 km in **1:33:54** in a course around 'The Tan'.

But Willi was after one final Olympics and he walked an outstanding race in the 1988 National 20 km title in August, finishing 3<sup>rd</sup> behind Baker and Jachno in a time of **1:25:02**, only 2 seconds outside Olympic qualifying. That 2 seconds separated Willi from a third Olympics. A 46 year old walker had walked the amazing time of 1:25 minutes for 20 km.

Willi knew only one way of racing and that was from the front. Even in the 1990 Commonwealth Games trial, he headed out at a fast pace and led before succumbing to a hamstring injury.

This was followed by a 2 year break from top competition for Willi and it was not until May 1992 that he made his next appearance at National level. On this occasion, the 50 year old walker won the Australian 50 km title with **4:12:57**, a time which ranked him second to Simon Baker nationally. This was his 12<sup>th</sup> National title – and it also made him the oldest walker to win a National Open title. Six weeks later he won the Victorian 50 km title in **4:18:38**. The times were not good enough for Olympic selection but amazing nonetheless for someone of that age.

From then on, Willi raced infrequently but remained competitive and could still produce good times. In the 1997/98 season, he was ranked 11<sup>th</sup> over the 20 km with a time of **1:35:25** – at over 55 years of age! Even in his sixties, he remained active on the local Ballarat front and still competed in the local Interclub and Cross Country seasons. Now in his seventies, he has hung up his racing shoes but can still be seen on the local Ballarat front doing his occasional walk or run.

Peter Waddell noted that Willi amassed a total of 37 Victorian titles and broke Australian records on 42 occasions. Even now, he still holds the Victorian 2 hour track record of 27.123 km, set at the Box Hill track on May 24 1980.