

A. J. (ATHOL) STUBBS – WORLD BEST OVER THE 1 MILE WALK

Athol Stubbs, born in 1910 and a member of Eastern Suburbs Athletics Club, was one of Australia's greatest ever speed walkers, winning a variety of titles and setting various State and National walking records as well as producing two World Best performances.

The first press cutting I have found on his career was dated January 10 1930 from the Sydney Mail (page 31) and concerns the NSW Track and Field Titles. It reads, with the typical anti-walking bias of the time

The 1924 Olympian E. Austen (Western Suburbs) defended his title in the three miles walk, which went to A. Stubbs, of Eastern Suburbs. While at some time or other every competitor transgressed the rule of walking, W. Clark (Randwick-Kensington), who finished second, was the only one to be disqualified. The winner's time was 22 min 40s.

He first came to prominence at the 1933-1934 Australian Track and Field season. In the Australian 3 Mile walk, held in Adelaide in January 1934, he placed second to William Marston of Victoria. Two days later, in the Australian 1 Mile walk, he looked set to go one better. After trailing Marston (Victoria) and Cocks (SA) in the first lap, he built up a commanding lead in the second lap, only to be disqualified in the third lap. Although this enabled Marston to take the double, it heralded the rise of a new champion onto the National scene. (This disqualification was a severe blow to NSW who had hoped to win the prestigious Coombes Shield at these titles. With the extra win to Victoria, they took the points over their more favoured interstate rivals.)

That same year, he won the NSW 1 Mile, 3 Mile and 7 Mile walk titles and set his first State record, **13:55.6** for the 2 Mile, easily breaking the previous record of 14:03.2, held by 1920 Olympic silver medallist George Parker.

Over the next few years, he regularly won all the shorter distance NSW titles but it was not until the 1937-1938 season that he won his first Australian titles. In Brisbane in December 1937, he won the double – the 1 Mile walk in **6:36.2** and the 3 Mile walk in **21:43.0**. The 1 Mile walk win, in particular, was the fastest mile walk done in Australia for some years. Then weeks later, he won a NSW mile walk off scratch in a time of **6:26.0**, only 4 seconds outside Bill Murray's famous 1912 Australian record of 6:22.8.

Over the next 3 years, he was unbeatable on the National arena and his times rewrote the record books. Finally in 1939 he finally took Murray's 1 Mile walk record when on 25 February at the Sydney Show Grounds, he won the NSW State 1 Mile title in **6:18.2**. This was not only a new State and National record but was the fastest 1 Mile walk time ever officially recorded in the world. Later that same year, he showed his versatility over the longer distances, recording a new National 10,000m walk record of **46:01.0** on August 19 in winning the Australian Amateur Walking Clubs championship ahead of George Knott who recorded 46:10.

The Victorian walking authorities were irate and formally raised their concerns about his technique – in those days, even the slightest whiff of being 'off the ground' was enough to get the purists up in arms. The following article and photo were published in the newspapers of the time

Is This Fair Walking ?



This walking action has become the subject of wide controversy in Australian athletics circles. The walker is A. J. Stubbs (N.S.W), whose action, objected to in Victoria, has been filmed by N.S.W. officials

for examination. The film has been sent to England for an opinion by the experts of the Belgrave Harriers – famous English athletic club which has produced many noted walkers. The regulation in competitive walking requires that at least one foot must be in contact with the ground all the time. Would you pass the N.S.W. athlete's action on this picture?

The fact that he continued to race seems to imply that his technique was exonerated by the English 'experts' and 1940 saw him consolidating his place as Australia's Number One walker.

On 18 February at the Sydney Sports Ground, he defended his State Title and improved his World Best 1 Mile time even further to **6:15.4**. The local Sydney newspaper reported as follows

For the second time within a year, Athol J. Stubbs, the 29 year old South Sydney walker, created a world's record for one mile. On Saturday at the Sports Ground, he had an 80 yards victory in the State Championships, and his time was 6m 15.4s. This reduced by 2.8s his previous figures established as the Show Grounds on February 25, 1939.

Stubbs was so confident of his ability to beat his earlier time that he stated prior to the race that his schedule would bring him inside it. He moved away from the field with A. L. Stephenson (University) always in second place. His time for the half mile was 3m 1s, the same as for his previous record walk. When the time was announced, Stubbs was accorded a tremendous ovation.

The track had been officially surveyed, the timekeepers agreed, and the judges of walking watching Stubbs throughout could find no fault in his style

There is every indication that Stubbs's great achievement will be officially endorsed. It was in every way a meritorious effort on a five laps to the mile track which has deteriorated by competition and a long dry season.

Near the finish Stubbs lapped Harry Sweet of Botany. Sweet paused to shake Stubbs's hand – probably the first time on record that a competitor has congratulated a winner while the event was in progress!



This photo of Athol Stubbs, taken towards the end of his career, is the only racewalking photo in the State Library of Victoria photographic archives. It shows his tremendous strength and obvious speed.

Unfortunately these two 1 Mile walk times were not granted World Record status because the International Athletic Federation did not recognize the 1 Mile distance amongst its records. But there is no doubt that these were legitimate world bests. The evolution of the 1 Mile Walk Records (outdoors), as compiled by Eric Rasmussen, shows the following record progression and clearly acknowledges Stubbs's times.

Thomas Griffith	GB	1987	6:48.0
Harry Webster	GB	1879	6:36.0
Eric Merrill	USA	1880	6:33.4
Frank Murray	USA	1883	6:29.4
F. Creamer	NZ	1897	6:29.4
George Larner	GB	1904	6:26.0

George Goulding	Canada	1910	6:25.8
Bill Murray	Australia	1912	6:22.8
Paul Bernhard		1936	6:21.2
Athol Stubbs	Australia	1939	6:18.2
Athol Stubbs	Australia	1940	6:15.4

At the time the 1940 Olympic Games were finally abandoned, Stubbs was the holder of the World Best for the 1 Mile walk and the Australian Record holder over 1500m (**5:59.00**), 3000m (**13:02.8**), 5000m (**22:19.0**) and 10000m (**46:01.0**). It is fair to say that he was denied almost certain Olympic selection by the onset of the Second World War.

It was not until he returned as a 35 year old War veteran that he could revisit his athletics career. It had been a long time without training and racing and it would be a long road back to fitness.

The first post-War Australian championships were held in Perth in January 1947 and the walks saw Stubbs pitted against one of the toughest walkers of the era, George Knott of Victoria. Knott has also been one of the top walkers pre-War and he, like Stubbs, was now a veteran aged in his mid thirties. Knott held him out in the 1 Mile walk, winning by 6 seconds in **6:31**. In the 3 Mile walk event, Stubbs had his revenge when Knott was disqualified for 'walking on the white line'. Stubbs's 3 mile time was a good **21:43**.

The January 1948 Australian track walking races, held at St Kilda Cricket Ground in Melbourne, are remembered in controversial circumstances. Percy Cerutti, at the A.A.U. meeting preceding the title, argued that since the IAAF judging rule only mentioned the need to maintain contact, any mode of progression that obeyed the contact criteria was acceptable. The meeting decided that the international rule would be used for this inaugural 2 Mile Walk event at the Australian titles. The outcome was easy to predict.

Victorian George Knott bolted to the front, using what could only be described as a bent legged action. Stubbs gamely chased, using a more traditional straight leg technique. So close was he to Knott that one of Knott's shoes was dislodged and came off. Knott stopped, put the shoe back on, chased, caught and passed Stubbs while calls for his disqualification echoed from the crowd. Knott was not disqualified and became the new National champion. Stubbs crossed the finishing line 100 yards further back in second place. A 5 Mile track walk championship was also held at these championships and Stubbs easily won that event in **37:15** with Knott a non starter.

In this era, each State had its own chief walking judge and each title race, whether State or National, was at the mercy of an ever changing interpretation of the rules. The National titles of this era must be understood in that light.

The 2 Mile Walk in the 1949 National Titles in Sydney saw nearly the whole field disqualified. Stubbs, who won, was one of only 3 finishers, the others being Ray Smith and Len Hickey of Victoria.



The 3 finishers in the 1948-1949 National 2 Mile walk title – Ray Smith (Vic), Athol Stubbs (NSW) and Len Hickey (Vic)

Tom Daintry, generally regarded as the best stylist in the land, was amongst those disqualified on this occasion. He commented years later

"The only disappointment in my sporting life was the only time I was disqualified by an ex-rival when only one judge was required to disqualify. I represented Queensland in the Australian Championships in New South Wales. He had spread the word two weeks beforehand that I and Don Keane would be put out. Which he did in the first 50 metres."

The 2 Mile walk at the 1950 National Titles in Adelaide was just as memorable. This time, in a case of one extreme to the other, everyone got past the judges! The two race leaders, 19 year old WA walker Don Keane and Stubbs, staged a mighty battle to break the Australian 2 Mile Walk record (both were awarded the same time of **13:43.6** with Keane being declared the winner) in an event that generated a lot of media attention. The photo below, taken as Keane passed Stubbs in the second last lap, shows both walkers stretching their bodies to the absolute limit. Stubbs was not one to relinquish a lead without a battle and his roughhouse tactics were intended to throw the younger walker off balance.



But the real clincher occurred further back in the field where WA walker D Waters (known rather disparagingly as 'running Waters') finished in 4th place. The photo below shows his technique midrace when walking alongside Stubbs. How did his technique satisfy even one judge much less a whole panel?



This was Stubbs's last National Track race. He was now nearly 40 years of age and had, for the last 4 years, faced stiff competition from his interstate rivals. He raced one further National title, coming 3rd in the 1950 Australian 10,000m walk in a time of **48:38.0**, before retiring from top level competition.

His many fine performances over a long period underline his credentials as one of Australia's best ever sprint walkers. In a time when there were few National opportunities, he won 5 Australian titles and took a number of silver and bronzes. His total performance sheet at the National level reads as follows

1933-34 Aust. T & F	3 miles Walk	2	130 yards behind winner
1937-38 Aust. T & F	1 mile Walk	1	6:36.2
	3 miles Walk	1	21:43.0
1946-47 Aust. T & F	1 mile Walk	2	6:37.6
	3 miles Walk	1	21:43.6
1947-48 Aust. T & F	2 miles Walk	2	100 yards behind winner
	5 mile Walk	1	37:15.0
1948-49 Aust. T & F	2 miles Walk	1	13:55.6
1949-50 Aust. T & F	2 miles Walk	2	13:43.6(est)
1950	10,000m Walk	3	48:38.0

He also remains one of the few Australian walkers to walk a legitimate 'world best' for any distance.