

BERND KANNENBERG, 1972 OLYMPIC 50KM CHAMPION

Bernd Kannenberg, born 20 August 1942 in Königsberg, East Prussia, is remembered as a consummate racewalker, winning gold in the 1972 Olympic 50km event in Munich. His story is indeed an interesting one.

His stocky build (he raced at 75km and was only 175cm in height) combined with his relatively late starting age (he took up racewalking at the age of 24, joining LAC Quelle Fürth) did not omen well for a top international career and his early form was solid but not outstanding.

His first two international appearances were fair but nothing to write home about – in 1970 he finished 13th in the Lugano Cup 50km event in 4:21:43 and in 1971 he took 9th place in the European Championship 20km in 1:32:06.

That perception was changed forever on 27th May 1972 when he stormed to a new 50km world best time of 3:52:45 in Bremen in a Germany vs Great Britain match. Suddenly this strongly build German walker was a serious medal contender for the upcoming Munich Olympics. Rumours surfaced of his huge training regime with up to 6 hours walking per day with weekly mileages of over 200 km.

He timed his surge to the top with precision, winning his first national championships in that same year, at the age of 29, when he took the 10,000m indoor track walk (42:34) and the 20km and the 50km roadwalk titles. These wins earned him selection in both the 20km and 50km events at the Munich Olympics.

His Olympic 20km was nothing to write home about when he failed to finish. But the 50km was considered his stronger event and he did not let the German public down. Faced with a very talented start list that included defending champion Christoph Holne, fellow East German Peter Selzer and Russian ace Veniamen Soldatenko, Kannenberg led at every checkpoint and, by the 35km mark, only the Russian remained in contention. Soldatenko was slow in taking his refreshments at the final feeding station and Kannenberg chose that moment to attack. Soldatenko, worried because he had already received a warning, did not respond, allowing the German to storm home in a new Olympic record of 3:56:11 and a win by over 2 minutes. The newspapers captured one of the most famous of all walking photos – Kannenberg powering down the finishing straight, caught in a perfect double support phase.



Soldatenko and Kannenberg fight out the 1972 Olympic 50 km



Kannenberg storms up the finishing straight to win the 1972 Olympic 50 km event – one of walking's most famous photos

Both walkers easily beat Soldatenko's official road world best time of 3:59:17 and Kannenberg became an instant German hero. The final results read as follows

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|----|---------------------|-----|-----------|
| 1. | Bernd KANNENBERG | GER | 3:56:11.6 |
| 2. | Veniamin SOLDATENKO | SOV | 3:58:24.0 |

3.	Larry YOUNG	USA	4:00:46.0
4.	Otto BARTCH	SOV	4:01:35.4
5.	Peter SELZER	GDR	4:04:05.4
6.	Gerhard WIEDNER	GER	4:06:26.0
7.	Vittorio VISINI	ITA	4:08:31.4
8.	Gabriel HERNANDEZ	MEX	4:12:09.0

That day, 3rd September 1972, became known as as "Golden Sunday" in West German sporting history as athletes from the Federal Republic won three gold medals - Klaus Wolfermann by 2cm in the javelin with a new Olympic record of 90.46 meters, Hildegard Falck in the women's 800m and Kannenberg in the 50km walk.

This started a golden few years for Kanneberg. He dominated German walking at a time when it was one of the world's leading racewalking countries with repeat 50km championship wins in 1973 and 1975, repeat wins over 20km in 1974 and 1975 and repeat wins in the 10,000m indoor championship in 1973, 1974 and 1975.

Internationally, he showed that his 1972 Olympic 50km win was no fluke, winning the 1973 Lugano Cup 50km in 3:56:50.8, again beating Bartsch, Holne and Soldatenko.

1974 saw more dominant walks with him establishing three world records and one world best track performance in quick succession. Firstly he set new marks for the 2 hours (27,137 mtrs.) and 30,000m (2:12:58.0) in Kassel on May 11. Then he set new marks for the 20,000m (1:24:45.0) and 1 hour (14,233 mtrs.) in Hamburg on May 25. In this same meet, Gerd Weidner set a new 20 Mile world record. Since Weidner already held the 30 mile and 50,000m world records, this meant that these two German walkers now held every world walking record between them. This was indeed the golden era of German walking.

Julian Hopkins, then the British National Walks Coach, after discussions with West German National Walks Coach Jurgen Kraemer, summarised Kannenberg's training regime as follows ¹

- He does all his training by himself.
- He does a great deal of general endurance work. At present, he is covering 700-800km per month. He has covered 1100km per month when preparing for 50km.
- He trains once per day with distances ranging from 20km up to 60km. In the winter, the training speed is about 10km/hr. In summer, the shorter sessions are covered at 11km/h.
- Each week he includes 1 hour of very fast walking. This is done as one effort in the middle of a long session or as two half-hour sessions with a short recovery.
- He does not include running in his training.
- He has his own team of coach, medical adviser and physiotherapist.

To top off what had been a wonderful year, he was narrowly beaten by Golbunichiy in the European 20km Championship in hot conditions in Rome. His efforts were suitably recognised when he was awarded the Rudolf-Harbig Memorial Prize, one of Germany's top sporting awards.

In the 1975 Lugano Cup, he was again second in another Championship 20km event in 1:26:20, this time behind Stadtmuller of East Germany. In November 1975, he walked his last 50km event, a track race in Nerviana in Italy, where he set a World Record of 3:56:51.4. This was the first time 4 hours had been beaten on the track - another first for the West German.

With the 50km event no longer on offer in the 1976 Olympics, he could not defend his title but had to focus solely on the 20km event. With his 20km performances over the last few years, he was still rated a definite chance for a second Olympic gold.

But it was not to be. By this time, he was suffering various health related issues, a consequence perhaps of the huge mileages to which he had subjected his body and he was forced to retire from the Olympic 20 km in severe pain.

Numerous operations later, he made an attempted comeback in 1978 but it was short lived. In 1982, Kannenberg made headlines once again as it became known that he was being treated for heart issues.

His career highlights read as follows;

1970	Lugano Cup	Eschborn	50km	13 th	4:21:43
1971	European Championships	Helsinki	20km	9 th	1:32:06

¹ *W Germany v G.B. Walks Match Analysis*, Julian Hopkins, Athletics Coach magazine, July 1974

1972	Olympic Games	Munich	20km	DNF	
	Olympic Games	Munich	50km	1 st	3:56:11
1973	Lugano Cup	Lugano	50km	1 st	3:56:50
1974	European Championships	Rome	20km	2 nd	1:29:08
1974	European Championships	Rome	50km	9 th	4:21:46
1975	Lugano Cup	Le Grand Quevilly	20km	2 nd	1:26:20
1976	Olympic Games	Montreal	20km	DNF	

His record speaks for itself. Although his time at the top was brief, his dominance over both Olympic distances in the early seventies ensures that his feats will live on long after he has faded from the public limelight.