

DON THOMPSON

It was reported this week that Don Thompson MBE, at the age of 73, had died in Frimley Park Hospital in Surrey after suffering an aneurysm. Don, who was one of the elder statesmen of English walking, will be forever remembered for winning the Gold Medal at the 1960 Rome Olympic Games - and of course for his unique training methods prior to this race!

Don, born on Friday 20th January 1933 in Hillingdon in London, was not your typical Olympic champion. Standing 5 feet 5½ inches (1.68m) and weighing only 120 lbs, he must have looked a scrawny specimen when he first took up racewalking in 1951 at 18 years of age. He joined Metropolitan Walking Club, the same club where Harold Whitlock was a member and, although he had no formal coach, he was happy to receive advice from Whitlock throughout his career.

It did not take long before people started to notice the young walker. In 1954, he suffered through his first London to Brighton walk (52 miles) and had truly found his calling. By 1955 he was amongst the leading walkers over the 50 km distance and in the longer ultra walking distances. During that breakthrough year, he was 2nd in the R.W.A. 50 km championship in **4:34:39**, won the London to Brighton in **8:06:24** and won the Milan 100 km championship in his first international event. People quickly realised that an indomitable spirit made up for his small stature and unsophisticated technique.

The next year, he improved one place to win the R.W.A 50 km championship in **4:24:39** and then won the London to Brighton classic with **7:45:24**, breaking Harold Whitlock's 1935 race record of **7:53:50**. These performances catapulted him into world class and he was rewarded with selection in the 1956 Olympic 50 km event. Alas, things did not go according to plan in Melbourne and, in hot conditions and on a tough course, Don collapsed when placed 5th with just 5 km to cover. It was a salutary lesson which he did not forget.

From then on, he was unbeatable over the longer distances in England. In 1957, he defended his R.W.A. 50 km title with **4:41:48**, won the Hastings to Brighton classic (38 miles) in **5:45:22** to break Tommy Richardson's 1936 course record by 7 secs, and then won his third London to Brighton in an unbelievable time of **7:35:12**. In fact an alteration to the Brighton road had increased the distance by 1195 yards to 53 miles 129 yards but Don still broke his record by nearly 20 minutes! This record still stands today, nearly 50 years later.

In 1958, he improved his 50 km time to **4:21:50** in winning his third R.W.A. Title at Wimbledon and came a great 5th in the European 50 km championships in Stockholm in **4:25:09**. Of course, it goes without saying that he also defended his London to Brighton title.

1959 saw a special performance when he set a huge PB of **4:12:19** in winning his fourth R.W.A. 50 km title at Baddersley. This event also saw the first 3 places going to Metropolitan walkers (W Misson was 2nd and N. Thompson was 3rd). He also came within a whisker of his own London to Brighton record after fading in hot conditions to win in **7:35:28**.

He was now ready for his second Olympic attempt and, remembering how he faltered in 1956, he decided to prepare as well as he could for the conditions he would probably encounter in Italy: searing heat and high humidity. His solution - he sealed his bathroom, heated it, filled it with steam and started vigorously exercising during the weeks leading up to the Games. *"There was an electric heater attached to the wall and I thought, 'well, that won't provide enough heat,'"* Thompson said last year. *"I had to boost the humidity, too, so I got a Valor stove and put that in the bath. Half an hour was more than enough; I was feeling dizzy by then. It wasn't until several years later that I realised I wasn't feeling dizzy because of the heat; it was carbon monoxide from the stove."*¹ Thus did he prepare, in addition of course to his regular road walking.

Frank McGuire² quotes the following extracts from *The Don Thompson Story*, Modern Athletics, England, December 1960

Heat Treatment. I was a bit scared of the heat prospect and had great fear of failing as I did in Melbourne, because of the heat. So came the much publicised bathroom treatment. During the three months prior to the Games, there were nearly 20 sessions of ½ to ¾ hours duration in an atmosphere of 100 degrees F, with a humidity around 55. I am sure it was a great help.

Relaxed Training. In mid-August, some three weeks before the race, I spent a very vigorous week in the Lake District on my own. The lovely fells provided a training ground with which I doubt even the much publicised Australian Portsea can compete, for a walker anyway. Some 150 miles of fast walking were indulged in. Then, being on my own for long hours each day provided the opportunity for plenty of uninterrupted thought about

¹ *Olympic 50km walking champion Thompson dies*, Duncan Mackay, Friday October 6, 2006, The Guardian

² *Training for Race Walking*, by Frank McGuire, Track & Field News, 1962

Rome prospects, and the walkers who might upset my hopes. There was a lot of very pleasant day dreaming, inducing a form of self hypnosis, which in turn was used to strengthen the will and boost the spirit to a high degree of exhilaration. So i went to Rome very relaxed.

In Rome. I normally consider myself as fairly active, but the four days spent in Rome prior to the race were unusually quiet and restful. The only training was three very short sprints on the roads round the village. Most of the time was spent resting on my bed or in deck chairs in the shade of the buildings, just summoning up enough strength for a journey to the restaurant to eat light meals.

No energy was wasted shopping or sightseeing. In fact, I only left the village twice, once to motor over the course, and the second time to inspect the exit from the stadium and the first mile of the course.

Sure enough, the race began in 87° Fahrenheit (31° Centigrade) weather and Don was ready. Wearing sunglasses and a French legionnaire's hat, he embarked on the long awaited race. At the halfway point, he found himself in first place, following the disqualification of two of the leaders and the early over-exertions of several others. Surprisingly, his only challenger was 1948 gold medallist John Ljunggren, who was two days shy of his 41st birthday. With 5 km to go, the two men were only one second apart. But then Thompson managed to pull away by 18 seconds over the next two kilometres, a lead that he was able to maintain the rest of the way. His winning time of **4:25:30** was a new Olympic record.

1.	Don THOMPSON	GBR	4:25:30.0	OR
2.	John LJUNGGREN	SWE	4:25:47.0	
3.	Abdon PAMICH	ITA	4:27:55.4	
4.	Aleksandr STCHERBINA	SOV	4:31:44.0	
5.	Thomas MISSON	GBR	4:33:03.0	



Don's Olympic triumph in Rome - wearing sunglasses and a French legionnaire's hat, Thompson was nicknamed "Il Topolino" - "Little Mouse" - by Italian fans.

He returned to a hero's welcome as befitted Britain's only 1960 athletics gold medallist and promptly got back to 'basics' by winning yet another London to Brighton race within days of his triumph. He finished off the year with a second win in the prestigious Milan 100 km event.

The next couple of years saw him continue on his merry way, fresh with the confidence of knowing he was an Olympic champion. He won the 1961 and 1962 R.W.A. 50 km championships, the Hastings to Brightons and the London to Brightons. He also participated in the inaugural Lugano Cup in 1961, taking silver in the 50 km event in **4:30:35** and took bronze in the 1962 European 50 km championship in **4:29:02**.

In 1962, Frank McGuire, in his book *Training for Race Walking*, quoted a typical week of training for Don as follows

Pre-Training Warmup	Only Before track training
Pre Race Warmup	Gentle walking, sprints, stretching repeated from about 1 hour before race until about 5 minutes from start.
Comments	Trains all the year. Races all distances on 50 km schedule.

Sunday	25 – 30 miles (in shirt and trousers) pace 6 m.p.h. or better
Monday	5 to 7 miles (stripped training)
Tuesday	Fast and slow laps – 1:50 and 2:40 x 440 yards x 12 to 15 laps
Wednesday	8 to 12 miles at 6½ m.p.h. or better
Thursday	(if no race on Sat.) 6 to 8 miles on road or 5x1 miles with 880 yards recovery laps
Friday	Rest
Saturday	10 to 14 miles or race 20 to 50 miles

Don's training regime was a simple one – big mileages on the weekends when he had the time and shorter sharper training during the week when he had to fit his training in with his full time job as an insurance clerk.

Sadly, his time at the top could not last forever and in the early sixties a new breed of speed walkers, headed by Paul Nihill, Ray Middleton and Ken Matthews, were revolutionising the sport. Middleton won the 1963 R.W.A. 50 km championship in 4:16:44 and Nihill won it in 1964 with 4:17:10. All of a sudden, Don was relegated to third spot over the 50 km distance. But third spot was still good enough to gain him his third Olympic berth and he raced competitively in Tokyo to finish 10th in **4:22:39**. Younger walkers were pushing the limits and improving the standard over all distances. Don's one failing was his lack of raw speed and it was now starting to tell.

Still, he was not one to give up without a fight and the 1965 Lugano Cup saw him finish 4th in a PB time of **4:09:14**. He was only 3 minutes behind 1964 Olympic 50 km winner Pamich and his performance certainly surprised those who thought him a spent force.

One of the highlights in this latter stage of his career was his 4th place in the 1966 Commonwealth Games 20 Mile event in Kingston in **2:46:43** in trying conditions (he was only 2 minutes behind winner Ron Wallwork). Final European 50 km championship (1967, 9th in **4:27:11**) and Lugano Cup 50 km championship (1967, 6th, **4:25:31**) appearances rounded off what had been a stellar international career.

In 1978, he came out of retirement to achieve his final walking goal, qualifying as Centurion 631 in the Leicester to Skegness 100 Mile where he came 10th with a time of **20:46:48**. He then came out of retirement a second time in 1990 at the age of 57 to earn his second centurion qualifier, finishing 3rd in the Leicester event in an even better **19:58:29**. In 1992 and 1993 he finished further hundreds, recording times of **20:49:41** and **20:51:15**. The 1993 event was a 24 hour even and he continued on to record a final distance of **184 km**.

He came out of retirement once again in 2000 to start in yet another hundred, but this time simply to make up the field and to be part of the event. For the next few years, he was a semi regular in the annual centurion event, walking significant distances befitting someone of his age.

When reviewing his wonderful career, it is one event in particular with which we associate Don – the London to Brighton classic. He was quite simply “Mr Brighton”, his record of having been placed in each of his 13 outings being unrivalled. Nine times he won and only he himself came within two and a half minutes of his quite superb course best of 7:35:12 – that's 7 miles per hour all the way for 53 miles!



“Mr Brighton” - Don in typical London to Brighton pose

When interviewed in 1980 at the AAA Centenary Celebration, he commented: ³ “No, its funny. I can't really remember anything about that walk. I could tell you a lot about my Brighton debut (1954) because I suffered in that one – or the 1959 race when the sun got to me and I came apart in the last couple of miles and just missed breaking my record by seventeen seconds. But in one's best races, everything goes so well that nothing stands out. Tactically, I would go through 5 miles in about 40 minutes, 10 in about 82:, 20 in about 2:45 and the 50 km point in about 4:25. From then on, I'd just be hanging on as best I could. Yes, I always looked forward to the Brighton. I'd build up throughout the summer and then give it all I had. I was extremely proud to break Harold Whitlock's record and from then on was keen to improve my own.”

The following list of Don's major National and International results says it all

1955	2 nd	R.W.A. 50 km championship, Coventry	4:34:39
1955	1 st	London to Brighton	8:06:24
1955,	1 st	Milan 100 km	
1956	1 st	R.W.A. 50 km championship, Enfield	4:24:39
1956	1 st	London to Brighton	7:45:32 (Rec)
1956	DNF	Olympic 50 km, Melbourne	
1957	1 st	R.W.A. 50 km championship, Leyland	4:41:48
1957	1 st	Hastings to Brighton	5:45:22 (Rec)
1957	1 st	London to Brighton	7:35:12 (Rec)
1958	1 st	R.W.A. 50 km championship, Wimbledon	4:21:50
1958	5 th	European 50 km, Stockholm	4:25:09
1958	1 st	London to Brighton	7:49:22
1959	2 nd	R.W.A. 20 Mile championship, Surrey	
1959	1 st ,	R.W.A. 50 km championship, Baddersley	4:12:19
1959	1 st	London to Brighton	7:35:28
1960	2 nd	R.W.A. 20 Mile championship, Gomersal	
1960	1 st	R.W.A. 50 km championship, Chigwell	4:32:55
1960	1 st	Hastings to Brighton	5:25:53 (Rec)
1960	1 st	Olympic 50 km, Rome	4:25:30 (GR)
1960	1 st	London to Brighton	7:37:42
1960	1 st	Milan 100 km	
1961	1 st	R.W.A. 20 Miles Championship, Chiswick	2:44:49
1961	1 st	R.W.A. 50 km championship, Sheffield	4:22:51
1961	2 nd	Lugano Cup 50 km, Lugano	4:30:35
1961	1 st	Hastings to Brighton	5:31:51
1961	1 st	London to Brighton	7:39:57
1962	2 nd	R.W.A 20 Miles Championship, Birmingham	
1962	1 st	R.W.A. 50 km championship, Luton	4:27:26
1962	1 st	Hastings to Brighton	5:32:07
1962	3 rd	European 50 km, Belgrade	4:29:00.2
1962	1 st	London to Brighton	7:49:58
1964	10 th	Olympic 50 km, Toky	4:22:39
1965	4 th	Lugano Cup 50 km, Pescara	4:09:14
1966	4 th	Commonwealth Games 20 Miles, Kingston	2:46:43
1966	1 st	R.W.A. 50 km championship	
1966	9 th	European 50 km, Budapest	4:27:11
1967	1 st	London to Brighton	
1967	6 th	Lugano Cup 50 km, Bad Saarow	4:25:31

³ *Wordsworth, Haridressers A.C., John Denver AND the London to Brighton*, John Lees, Athletics Monthly, Sept 1980

Don's list of achievements makes for awesome reading

- 8 R.W.A. 50 km championship wins (1955-1962, 1966)
- 9 London to Brighton wins (1955-1962, 1967) and a course record that still stands today
- 4 Hastings to Brighton wins (1957, 1960-62) and a course record that still stands today
- 2 wins in the Milan 100 km (1955, 1960)
- 3 Olympic 50 km appearances (1956, 1960 and 1964) with a Gold medal in 1960
- 3 European 50 km championship appearances (1958, 1962 and 1966)
- 3 Lugano Cup 50 km appearances (1961, 1965, 1967)
- 1 Commonwealth Games 20 Miles appearance (1966)

He won the prestigious Edgar Horton Cup (R.W.A award for best individual performance during the Association year) on 4 occasions (1956-1958, 1961) and in the early 1960s, he was the British record holder for 20, 25 and 30 miles, 3, 4 and 5 hours, 25, 30, 40 and 50 km.

Don was an unassuming person, lacking in the airs and graces one might have expected. He was willing to talk to anyone and was indeed a credit to the sport of racewalking and to the great English tradition. He kept a training diary throughout his career; and each day he wrote a one-liner recording what he had done. When he won his gold medal, he wrote two! We will sadly miss him but will always remember his wonderful feats and achievements.

Tim Erickson
Sat 7 October 2006

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