

AUSTRALASIA'S FIRST OLYMPIAN

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HARRY KERR – 1908 OLYMPIC 3500M WALK *Taranaki man walked his way into Games legend*



Nearly a century ago, a now almost forgotten Taranaki sportsman became the first New Zealander to win an Olympic medal. Harry Kerr, from Waipuku, near Tariki, was a member of a combined team of athletes from New Zealand and Australia when he claimed the bronze medal in the 3500m walk at the London Games held at Shepherd's Bush in 1908. But in those early new-era Olympic days, his triumph merited less than a paragraph in local newspapers, while the 5-0 victory of the Taranaki rugby team over the touring English ran to two columns.

The cable from London that reported Kerr's success was unembroidered by sportswriters when it went to press: "Larner and Webb (Britishers) were first and second and Kerr (New Zealand) third, in the 3500 metre walking match, the time was 14 minutes 55 seconds."

Born at Waipuku in 1879, Kerr was regarded as an exceptional athlete, excelling at shooting, rugby and most track and field events. However, he was particularly attracted to walking, a sport he pursued as a professional. He competed at major professional events such as the New Year's Day meet in Dunedin, where his reputation caused him to concede massive handicaps.

Deciding to turn amateur at the end of the 1904 season, Kerr was required to stand down from all competition for two years and he spent that time building the strength of his 1.93-metre (6ft 4in) frame, clearing bush on his family's farm at Tariki. Returning to the track he achieved Olympic selection by winning the Australasian one and three-mile titles at Hobart early in 1908.

Family historians say Kerr's athletics were a considerable drain on the farm. Very much the gentleman, his travel and accommodation during the six-week sea journey to the Olympics, as he pursued his strictly amateur Olympic goals, were at his quite considerable expense. Despite almost missing the start of his race at the Olympics, he strode in a comfortable third, followed two places back by fellow Kiwi Arthur Rowland. For his efforts he received a tiny bronze medal, about a third the size of a modern Olympic medal, presented in a small box engraved "Olympic Games, third prize 3500 Metres Walk, London 1908". Although he qualified easily for the final of the 10,000m race, he was forced to withdraw because of bruised feet, caused by the cinder track which many grasstrained athletes were unused to.

He returned to New Zealand a national celebrity and kept faith with his supporters by winning the Australasian one and three-mile titles again in 1909 at Brisbane and in 1911 at Wellington. He won three New Zealand titles in 1911 and 1912. His time of 21:36.6 for the three-mile race at Wellington remained the national record until 1946.

He retired from competition at the end of the 1912 season and in 1913 married Isobelle Foster from Brighton, Christchurch. During World War I, he served in Europe before returning to his family farm on Surrey Rd at Tariki.

In 1925, he came out of retirement to compete at the national championships, being held "just down the line" at Wanganui. Forty-six years old and out of training, he worked at getting fit by walking up and down the incline on the nearby railway track. Finding that exercise a bit tough on boots, he cleared a circular track around his home and trained there. In a performance hailed as little short of marvellous for a man of his age, he again won both one and three-mile titles. Walking purists say he demonstrated a perfect heel-and-toe action that was the basis of the modern walking style.

Tariki resident Graham James said his father Edgar and Harry Kerr served together overseas during WWI, returned together and were neighbours and good mates.

Mr James said Kerr was possibly more devoted to sport than he was to farming and was a Taranaki representative lawn bowler and an avid rugby follower.

"I think he was a teetotaler before he went away to the war, but that changed too," he said.

Harry Kerr died of cancer on May 17, 1951, aged 74.

His 6 Australasian Open Men Track Walk championship wins were as follows

1908 1 Mile	Harry Kerr	NZ	7:23.6	P Stubberfield	NZ		J Smith	NSW
1908 3 Miles	Harry Kerr	NZ	23:55.6	P Stubberfield	NZ		no third	
1909 1 Mile	Harry Kerr	NZ	6:33.8	J Harley	NSW	6:49	H Winters	NSW
1909 3 Miles	Harry Kerr	NZ	22:02.4	J Harley	NSW	22:33	H Winters	NSW
1911 1 Mile	Harry Kerr	NZ	6:32.8	William Murray	VIC		D Cashman	NZ
1911 3 Miles	Harry Kerr	NZ	21:36.6	D Cashman	NZ		W Ellis	TAS

The 1908 Olympic 3500m Walk result was as follows

1.	George LARNER	GBR	14.55.0
2.	Ernest WEBB	GBR	15.07.4
3.	Harry KERR	NZL	15.43.4
4.	George GOULDING	CAN	15.49.8
5.	Arthur ROWLAND	NZL	16.07.0
6.	Charles WESTERGAARD	DEN	17.21.8
7.	Einar ROTHMAN	SWE	17.50.0
	William PALMER	GBR	DNF