

VOLODYMYR GOLUBNICHYIY

A special anniversary occurred on 2 June 2006, the 70th birthday of one of the world's great race walkers, Volodymyr Golubnychiy of Ukraine. It was recognised in his native city of Sumy by a special Race Walking meeting.

Born on 2nd June 1936, Volodymyr Golubnychiy's career spanned five Olympic Games, winning two golds, one silver and a bronze at the 20km distance. He three times broke the World record for the distance, with two of those performances ratified as official records - 1:30:02.8 (02/10/1955, Kiev) and 1:27:05.0 (23/09/1958, Simferopol), and was European champion in 1974.

His career as a walker started by accident when, as a 13 year old, he was cajoled into taking place in a schools competition walk when the second school representative took sick. He won the event and the rest is history. At age 17, he easily won the Ukrainian adult championship in the 10 km walk, leaving many well known masters of the event behind. He followed this up with Ukrainian records at various distances and in 1955, as a 19 year old, he became the 20 km world record holder in winning in Kiev – his time was 1:30:02.8.

His record did not last long as first Leonid Spirin lowered it to 1:28:45.2 in June 1956 and then Mikhail Lavrov lowering it again to 1:27:58.2 in August 1956. The Russians were expected to clean sweep the medals in the Melbourne Olympics but, surprisingly, Golubnychiy was not amongst the team – he remained at home with a serious inflammation of the liver which threatened to end his walking career. History shows that the Soviets still took all three medals in the 20 km walk with Spirin winning in 1:31.27.4, followed by Mikenas and Junk.

It took a long time for the young Ukrainian to fully recover from his debilitating illness but the world knew he was truly back when, in September 1958, in Simferopol, he regained his 20 km world record with 1:27:05.0. He went into the 1960 Rome Olympics as the clear favourite and did not disappoint. He entered the stadium well in front and started his final lap of the track, soaking in the applause and savouring the moment. What he did not realise was that a young unknown Australian by the name of Noel Freeman was making big inroads into his lead and was in sight of a huge upset. Eventually Golubnychiy looked around, saw Freeman, accelerated and went on to win by 9 seconds in a time of 1:34:16.4. It had been a sweltering Rome day and the slow times did not really reflect the quality of the performances.



Golubnychiy toes the line at the start of the 1972 Olympic 20 km in Munich

The 1964 season proved, unfortunately, to have been overloaded for the Soviet Union's top athletes. Frequent competitions and a long period spent in peak competitive form before the Olympics doomed the Soviet walkers and long distance walkers to the role of outsiders at Tokyo. This illustrates the point that even in the most highly skilled and regimented coaching regimes, mistakes can still be made. His effort in the 1964 Olympic 20 km event says a lot about the measure of the man. Faltering early, he fell back through the field and eventually collapsed mid race. Picking himself up, he started again and slowly things came together. He moved up through the field and eventually finished

third behind Englishman Ken Matthews and Dieter Lidner of East Germany. Yet this bronze medal was particularly special to him as he said it represented his victory over himself, his ability to reveal and use hitherto unknown resources of strength.

He returned from Japan fully confident in his own strength and started to prepare for his next Olympic appointment in Mexico City in 1968. The Soviet team flew to Mexico City a full month before the Opening Ceremony of the Games, on the recommendation of their sports medicine experts. With ample time to watch the competition, it soon became clear that American Ron Laird looked the toughest proposition so, come the day of the Olympic 20 km event, Golubnichiy chose to shadow the American and ignore the rest of the field. This was a major miscalculation as they soon found themselves at the back of the field and fast losing ground on the leaders. Both walkers had to put on a burst of speed to catch the leaders. But this came at a cost and the American soon fell back while Golubnichiy struggled in the group, trying to recover. His room mate and training partner Nikolai Smaga knew what he had to do, taking the lead and controlling the race for the first 18 km before helping Golubnichiy break clear of the field. The two Soviet friends entered the stadium looking certain for gold and silver.

Then the 60,000-plus spectators went wild as a third walker appeared – Mexican champion Jose Pedraza. Two hundred metres from the finish, Pedraza passed Smaga and set his sights on Golubnichiy. Pedraza's style seemed far from legal and he received three cautions (one step short of a warning). But it would have taken a suicidal judge to disqualify the determined Pedraza while the stadium echoed with chants of "May-hee-co" and "Pay-drah-zah." An international incident was avoided when Golubnichiy drew away slightly in the homestretch to win by a mere three yards.



The famous finish – Golubnichiy looks over his shoulder with 90m to go to see Pedraza closing quickly.

Then there was Munich in 1972. In the 20km event, it was only Golubnichiy who stopped an East German clean sweep of the medals. His time of 1:26:55.2 was well under the Olympic record and only 11 seconds behind gold. The East German sports machine had been born and was now bearing the first fruits of its ruthlessly scientific sports development program. This program would continue to produce champions up until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990.

The silver medal that he won at the age of 36 at the 20th Olympics might, it seemed to many, nicely round off his sporting career. But he felt otherwise. "Right after the medal ceremony, I went up into the stands to our fans and coaches", wrote Golubnichiy in his diary, "and I was congratulated, my hand shook. And suddenly I heard someone say, I'm sure without any malice, 'Congratulations, old boy, you've made a fine finish to your sporting career!'"

Golubnichiy was far from finished and he astounded everyone when in 1974, in a typically blistering Rome sun, he won the European 20 km title, pushing 20 km world record holder Bernd Kannenburg back into second place. He followed this up with a win in the 1955 Soviet National 20 km championship in Kiev, his time an astonishing 1:23:55.0 – at 39 years of age! Given these performances, his final Olympic appearance in 1976 was disappointing – only 7th in 1:29:24.6. It was the first time in 5 Olympics that he had failed to win a medal – but he was 40 years of age after all.

Volodymyr Golubnichiy was without any doubt the greatest walker of his era and remains today, probably second only to Robert Korzenioski in the racewalking hall of fame. Happy birthday Volodymyr!

Olympic career summary -

1960	OG Rome 20km	gold
1964	OG Tokyo 20km	bronze
1968	OG Mexico 20km	gold
1972	OG Munich 20km	silver
1976	OG Montreal 20km -	7 th place

Postscript: In July 2009, New Zealand walker Mike Parker was lucky enough to meet with Golubnichiy in his home town of Sumy in the Ukraine. Here is part of what he had to say:

We received word from the President of the Sumy region Olympic Committee that Golubnichiy was more than happy to meet me and that arrangements had been made for me to meet him in Sumy on Monday 17th. I have to say that i am still reeling from the shock of the hospitality we received in Sumy. After spending the night in a hotel in Sumy we were escorted to the meeting with Golubnichiy, arguably, for those of you who don't the greatest race walker of all time and one of the greatest ever athletes. To my shock Golubnichiy and a contingent of press and television cameras were waiting for our arrival. To cut a long and eventful story short, what I thought would be a brief ten minutes with Vladimir turned out to be a fantastic full day in his company, and what a man he is. I don't think I have ever meet somebody who has achieved so much and is so humble. We were shown the new Vladimir Goubnichy indoor stadium complex built in his honour and taken to the athletic track across town where it all began for Vladimir as a fifteen year old back in 1951. I happened to mention to Vladimir that I used to have a book on him until I lent it to someone many years ago and never got it back. A minute later Vladimir disappeared, he had jumped into his car driven home to get this book for me with a personalised inscription, in addition he gave me one of his Russian track suits.

Vladimir took us to his apartment in the city where we could not but be mightly impressed by the simplicity of his style of life, a life that has remained the same since the day he took up athletics, despite numerous attractive offers. Vladimir showed us his array of trophies and medals he has won over the years. Tthis collection is just about to go in its entirety to the Sumy museum so that the people of Sumy a city of 350,000 can have access to their most famous inhabitant's career rewards.

The next morning Sasha picked us up and took us out into the country to witness one of their training camps for their Biathlon team, full of Olympic hopefuls taking part. Sumy can boast over 1000 race walkers, 700 wrestlers and over 2000 Biathlon athletes. Most of this growth in sport can be put down to Vladimir Golubichy, a legend in Sumy and Ukrainian sport.



On 17 July 2009 in Sumy, Ukraine, Mike Parker was fortunate to meet up with one of racewalking's all time greats - Vladimir Golubnichy. The pair are seen standing outside the recently completed Vladimir Golubnichy indoor athletics track and sports facility built in honour of Golubnichy, a legend in Ukrainian and the former Soviet Union's sporting history.

Photo compliments of Mike Parker