

RAY MIDDLETON: 1936 - 2023

Ray Middleton is not one of the household names of racewalking outside his native England but his career was, nevertheless, outstanding. Spanning the 1960s and extending into the 1970s, he won 2 golds, 8 silvers and 4 bronze medals in British Championships and represented England internationally on 11 occasions, with career highlights including silvers at the 1963 Lugano Cup and the 1966 Commonwealth Games.



Ray (number 49) with a trademark hankerchief on his head – 1971. Len Duquemin is the walker in the middle facing the camera

Born Raymond Christopher "Ray" Middleton on 9th September 1936 in Marylebone, Greater London, the Belgrave Harrier athlete had started his career as a schoolboy high jumper and half miler but a switch to race walking in his twenties proved a fateful move.

He was tall for a walker of that era - 190cm or 6ft 2 1/2 in - and weighed in at 87kg (192 lbs).

He represented Great Britain at the 1964 Summer Olympics in the 50km walk. He was also a six-time participant at the IAAF World Race Walking Cup between 1961 and 1973 and he competed at the European Athletics Championships on three occasions (1962, 1966, 1969), with his best placing at that competition being fifth (achieved in both 1966 and 1969). The highlights of his international career were his two silver medals, won at the 1963 IAAF World Race Walking Cup and at the 1966 British Empire and Commonwealth Games.

His 11 international appearances read impressively, with consistently high finishes.

1961	Lugano Cup	Lugano	50 km	4 th	4:39:24
1962	European Champs	Beograd	50 km	DQ	
1963	Lugano Cup	Varese	50 km	2 nd	4:17:15
1964	Olympic Games	Rome	50 km	13 th	4:29:55
1965	Lugano Cup	Pescara	50 km	7 th	4:19:14
1966	Commonwealth Games	Kingston	20 Miles	2 nd	2:45:19
1966	European Champs	Budapest	50 km	5 th	4:23:01
1967	Lugano Cup	Bad Saarow	50 km	8 th	4:29:23
1969	European Champs	Athens	50 km	5 th	4:27:00
1970	Lugano Cup	Eschborn	50 km	11 th	4:19:57
1973	Lugano Cup	Lugano	50 km	19 th	4:22:25

Nationally, he had much success at the Race Walking Association championships. He won the 50km title in 1963 and 1965, as well as being runner-up in 1964, 1966, 1967 and 1970. He placed in the top three on five occasions over the

20-mile championship distance and was also third in the 7-mile race at the AAA Championships in 1962. His 14 RWA Championship medals read as follows

1961	RWA 20 Miles	3 rd	2:51:12
1961	RWA 50 km	2 nd	4:29:27
1962	RWA 50 km	2 nd	4:30:59
1963	RWA 20 Miles	3 rd	2:44:21
1963	RWA 50 km	1 st	4:16:44
1964	RWA 20 Miles	3 rd	2:42:06
1964	RWA 50 km	2 nd	4:21:14
1965	RWA 20 Miles	2 nd	2:44:46
1965	RWA 50 km	1 st	1:17:23
1966	RWA 20 Miles	2 nd	2:40:08 (First British Walker)
1966	RWA 50 km	2 nd	4:32:18
1967	RWA 20 km	3 rd	1:39:27
1967	RWA 50 km	2 nd	4:33:28
1968	RWA 50 km	2 nd	4:21:22

Almost as an aside, the RWA website lists his RWA Best Performance for the 8 Hour standard, done in 1974. I was at one stage sent a copy of the Athletics Weekly report on that performance by Rob Elliot of the Sarnia Walkers Club on Guernsey. Rob, like me, is a historian of the sport and I recommend his fine website <http://sarnia.wordpress.com/> for the many historical easter eggs available therein.

This 1974 8 Hour track event was described by the Athletics Weekly correspondent as the walking highlight of the year. The venue was the New River Sports Centre, White Hart Lane, N22, and the start time was set at 9:30AM on Sunday 29 September 1974. The event was sponsored by Accolade and featured 16 invited competitors. Middleton, who had been a convincing winner in that year's London to Brighton classic (with a time of 8:17:50), was a clear favourite and Harold Whitlock's 1935 records looked eminently beatable. Ray was at that time 38 years of age, employed as a postal worker and nearing the end of his illustrious career.

Excerpts from the Athletics Weekly report (October 12, 1974) follow:

Five World Bests for Ray

In a race which produced stirring performances in plenty, constant fluctuations in fortune, courage, endurance and fortitude, the most satisfying aspect of the Accolade 8 Hours track walk was the involvement of everyone present. Organiser Bill Sutherland did a fantastic job and was rewarded with a record breaking day in all ways...everyone had a great day, but no one more than Ray Middleton.

The epitome of the walker's walker, Ray had his finest race in a career already lasting almost two decades in the sport. Never experiencing a rough period, Ray says he was lifted by the encouragement and excitement of the crowds as he got amongst the records held by Harold Whitlock since 1935. Harold was there, very happy indeed to present the very cup he had received 39 years ago to Ray, who in turn was proud to have beaten the very fine records set by a man who has been an inspiration to all British walkers for the past four decades.

From the start, Ray made it clear he meant business by setting the pace, tracked by John Lees and Dave Boxall, the latter dropping away after 5 miles or so.

10 km splits: Middleton 53:04, Lees 53:05, Boxall 53:39, Lawton 54:32, Selby 55:02, Markham 55:27, Fogg 55:50, Michell 55:53, Holmes and Harrison 55:55, Harding 56:17, Young and Dowling 56:18, Casey 58:23, Vos 58:36, Moulinet 58:37.

John Lees then took over and proceeded to blaze the trail in no uncertain manner before being overhauled by Middleton at 26 miles. The 20 Mile splits were as follows

20 mile splits: Lees 2:50:59, Middleton 2:53:02, Selby 2:56:13, Lawton 2:56:17, Fogg 2:58:55, Harding 3:00:37, Markham 3:01:23, Boxall 3:02:37, Harrison 3:03:05, Holmes 3:03:10, Moulinet 3:03:17, Michel 3:04:29, Young 3:05:27, Dowling 3:15:30, Vos 3:16:23, Casey 3:18:23.

Ray's judgement and experience now paid off as Lees felt his great effort. Charley Fogg, walking a stormer, came into third with Harding, looking better and better, close behind.

50 km splits: Middleton 4:34:04, Lees 4:36:30 (personal best!), Fogg 4:39:26, Selby 4:40:15, Moulinet 4:44:50, Selby 4:47:51, Holmes 4:50:01, Michel 4:50:44, Lawton 4:51:38, Markham 4:52:02, Harrison 4:53:48, Boxham 4:55:52, Young 4:57:17.

With the records at his mercy, Ray went on relentlessly. Moulinet had roared through to such effect that he had virtually caught Lees at 40M and was to have a battle royal with John and Ken Harding for second as the latter

closed up. First Lees recovered and dropped his rivals but finally it was super-vet Harding who finished strongest off all. Colin Young now was making inroads after having to make several pit stops early on.

40M: Middleton 5:56:29, Lees 6:04:04, Moulinet 6:04:22, Harding 6:04:49, Selby 6:13:25, Fogg 6:14:10, Michel 6:19:52, Young 6:23:07, Holmes 6:23:43, Boxall 6:23:57, Harrison 6:24:05

And so to the last gruelling miles. Ray swept on inspired, Ken never faltered, finally John Lees and Alain Moulinet slowed and Charley Fogg went berserk in a final effort and thought he had nailed third, only to discover he had to find another lap to get Lees. Closing strongly, Colin Young overtook Michell despite the latter's last minute burst.

The generally cold weather with a strong breeze was responsible for the many short pit stops taken by several walkers, while some ultra fast laps were put in when certain walkers heard their chosen favourite records played over the loud speaker system! Organiser Bill Sutherland had "The Sun Won't Shine Any More" played just before the finish – the signal for a torrential downpour. All in all, a memorable day for everyone who was present.

Results (15 finishers from 16 starters)

1.	Ray Middleton	Bel	53M	352Y / 85.618 km
2.	Ken Harding	RSC	52M	645Y / 82.277 km
3.	John Lees	B&H	51M	1353Y / 83.314 km
4.	Charley Fogg	Enf	51M	1042Y / 83.029 km
5.	Alain Moulinet	FRA	51M	817Y / 82.824 km
6.	Peter Selby	Sy WC	51M	158Y / 82.223 km
7.	Colin Young	Ex B	50M	89Y / 80.550 km
8.	R Michell	B'ith	49M	1491Y / 80.221 km
9.	D. Harrison	Boundary	49M	950Y / 79.741 km
10.	Dave Boxall	B&H	49M	221Y / 79.052 km
11.	M Holmes	Yks	48M	1448Y / 78.573 km
12.	Peter Markham	Leic	48M	1214Y / 78.360 km
13.	J Vos	Neth	47M	486Y / 74.796 km
14.	T Casey	RoI	44M	1456Y / 70.855 km
15.	John Dowling	RoI	43M	693Y / 69.418 km

50 Mile splits for the top contenders: Middleton 7:31:06 Harding 7:40:45; Lees 7:42:33, Moulinet 7:46:44, Fogg 7:48:13, Selby 7:49:55, Young 7:57:17

The winner Middleton finished the gruelling test in possession of no fewer than five world best performances:

- 40 miles in 5:56:29
- 40M 581Y (64.905 km) in 6 hours
- 46M 1263Y (75.187 km) in 7 hours
- 50 miles in 7:31:06
- 53M 352Y (85.618 km) in 8 hours

In fact, Whitlock's record of 51M 1042Y had been bettered by the first 3 finishers and equalled by the fourth place getter.



One record breaker, Harold Whitlock (1935), congratulates another, Ray Middleton (1974).



Ray Middleton pictured towards the end of his 214-lap stint at Haringey on September 29th.

What did the future hold for Ray at that stage: "I will make one last bid for the Lugano Cup place in 1975. I might go for the 100 miles in the same year. I will not walk at international level after 1976 but I will still walk at club level."

History shows that he failed in his final attempt for a 7th Lugano vest but his 6 appearances was amongst the most prolific of all time.

Interestingly, he never sought to become a Centurion, but his two longer distance feats in 1974 (winning the London to Brighton 53 mile walk in 8:17:50 and setting a new world record for the 8 Hours Track Walk with 53 Miles and 352 yards) show that he could have easily achieved that feat if he set his mind to it. His career as a shorter distance international walker took precedence

As an aside, he worked for the British Postal Service in the London Sorting Office. As such, he was eligible to compete in the European Postman's Walk, held each year in a different European city. ¹

The following article, published in the Daily Mirror on Wednesday 16 September 1970, documents his win in that year's European Postal Championship which was held in London.

Britain's postmen show that they have the fastest feet in the West

The fastest postman in Europe is Ray Middleton. He has had his eye on the title for years. Ray is so keen on walking that he regards his daily postal round as no more than a stroll.

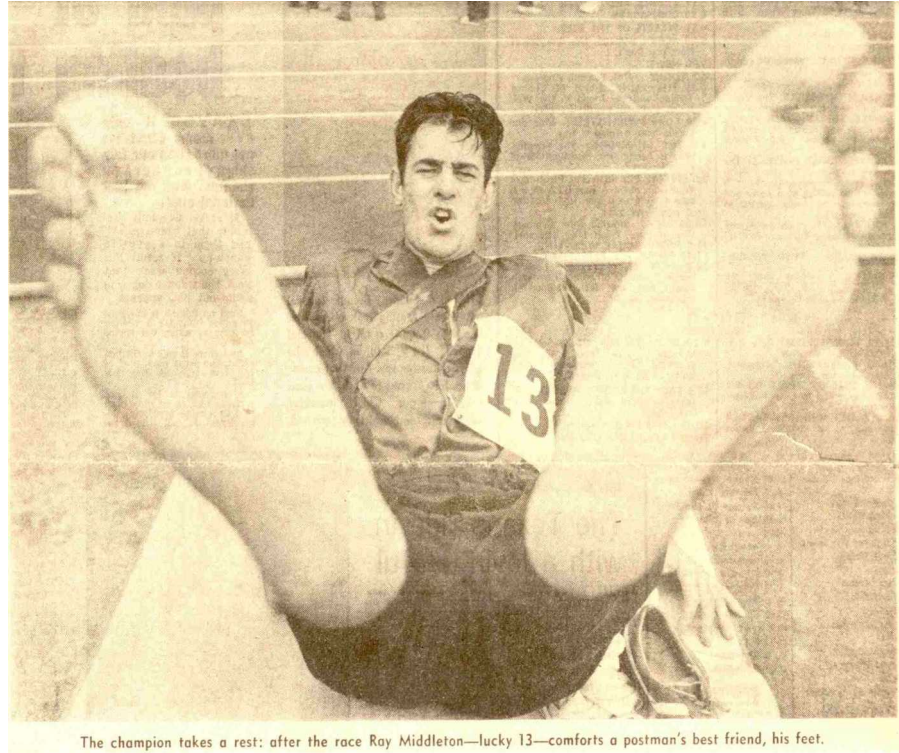
Yesterday in London, 35-year-old Ray led a team of British postmen (see photo below) to victory in the Postman's Walk – postal code for the European Postal Road Walking Championship.

They took on the cream of postmen from thirteen other countries. For nine and a quarter miles, they walked around the Crystal Palace circuit in full uniform.

Ray took his win modestly. He examined his feet for sores and went home to Hendon.

His daughter Lesley was much more excited. She was seven yesterday and Daddy's win was as thrilling as a birthday parcel.

¹ Postman's Races were a regular fixture in UK and Europe and there were even European Championships held in the sixties and seventies. The British based Postman's Walks were held annually from 1961 to 2011. See a full discussion of these events at <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/Postman%20Walks.pdf>.



This win was also captured for posterity by British Movietone news and can be viewed even now on Youtube at <https://youtu.be/wygWpWzMTOE>.

Ray was later named as one of the top celebrities of the year by comedian Charlie Chester.

The following year, Ray had to settle for second in the European Postal Championship 10km walk, held in Stuttgart in West Germany. On that occasion, the event was won by Guernsey walker Len Duquemin, with Ray second and a German walker third. The occasion is captured in the following photos



Ray Middleton and Len Duquemin at the 1971 Postmans Walk in Stuttgart, West Germany

In September 2011, Ray attended the 50th and final Annual Postman's walk, seeing Dave Allen win for the sixteenth time – making him the most successful competitor in the event ever. The cameras captured the occasion



Ray at the 50th Postman's Walk, September 2011, with BPMA Curator Vyki Sparkes and BPMA Access & Learning Manager Andy Richmond (photo <https://postalheritage.wordpress.com/tag/ray-middleton/>)

Ray passed away on Sunday 8th January 2023, aged 86 years. According to the Middleton family, the former athlete enjoyed a great Christmas but succumbed to illness early in the new year and, after a brief stay in hospital, died from suspected lung failure following an infection.

He will be remembered for many wonderful walking achievements, for his wonderful friendly nature and as one who was admired by all.

Tim Erickson

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