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A VERY PEDESTRIAN SUBJECT – George White

A BRIEF HISTORY OF RACE WALKING

Walking races have occurred for a long time in many countries but it is generally agreed that walking as a real sport began in England as early as the 16th century. William Wallace, in his 1989 doctorate dissertation on "Race Walking in America: Past and Present", wrote the following.

"Competitive walking of man against man appeared sometime late in the 16th century or early in the 17th in England. It became the custom in that period for members of the English aristocracy to employ 'footmen' to accompany them during their travels across country by coach. These were in effect servants whose duties included the carrying of messages and documents, hastening ahead of the family coach to make arrangements at inns for an evening's food, drink, and sleep, or advising the country house staff of the imminence of the family's arrival.

Heavy wagering being a part of the excesses practiced by the nobility at that time, it was inevitable that masters began to match their footmen against one another in races. With sizeable sums at stake these noblemen increasingly sought footmen who could demonstrate speed and stamina. They were then trained as 'gladiators' to compete in matches arranged over varying distances. Thus it was that a class of professional pedestrians evolved on the British scene.

Even King Charles 2nd was known for his walking and apparently was never beaten in walking from Whitehall to Hampton Court (would anyone choose to beat him?)

By the mid 19th century it had become tradition that competitors obey the "fair heel and toe" rule. This rule, the source of modern race-walking, was basically that the toe of one foot could not leave the ground before the heel of the next foot touched down.

The established sport of "pedestrianism" meant racing over long distances - sometimes thousands of miles--or almost continuously for many days. One of the most famous pedestrians of the 19th century was Captain Robert Barclay. His most impressive feat was to walk 1 mile every hour for 1000 consecutive hours. Around 10,000 people came to watch over the course of the event which he completed in 42 days. He won a large sum in prize money and wagers (figures vary from 16,000 pounds to 100,000 guineas) and after the finish was said to have had a bath, slept for 17 hours and then got up in perfect health and went for a long walk.

Barclay's feat was copied by or improved upon by many pedestrians in the later years of the nineteenth century. Ada Anderson walked a quarter-mile in each quarter-hour over the 1,000 hours; Richard Manks walked one mile every half hour for one thousand miles and William Gale did one and a half miles every hour for one thousand successive hours.

Another popular goal was for walkers to cover 100 miles in less than 24 hours, from which they earned the nickname "Centurions". Enormous cash prizes were offered for these races. However in 1911 the Centurion title was set up as an award for amateur race-walkers in Britain. Centurion clubs now exist in many countries including of course, Australia.

(In Adelaide we had our own "pedestrian" in Jack Weber. He became the second "Centurion" in Australia in 1971 at age 57, covering the 100 miles on the Adelaide Harriers track in 22 hours 44 minutes and 53 seconds. In 1979 he set a new walk record time from Melbourne to Adelaide in 10 days 2 hours and 30 minutes and in 1980 he set a world record at age 66 on the Adelaide Harriers track, covering 1062 miles 440 yards in 38 days 2 hours and 30 minutes -an average of 27.87 miles per day.)

In the first half of the 19th Century, race-walking had found its way across the Atlantic and, by the late 1870's, had become the second largest betting sport in the United States -- second only to horse racing.

Betting excesses in "professional" athletics during the closing decades of the 19th Century led to their being replaced by "amateur" athletics on several levels. The first English amateur walking championship judged by the "fair heel and toe" rule was held in 1866.

Race walking entered the Olympics in 1904 when an 880-yard walk was a part of the 10-event "all-around" competition that eventually developed into the decathlon. In the unofficial 1906 Olympic Games there were individual 1500m and 3000m races, and then in 1908 Games, race-walking made its official Olympic debut with 3500m and 10-mile events. Walking events over several different distances have been official events in the summer games since then (only the 1928 Games did not include a walk). The 50-kilometer race-walk became an Olympic event in 1932 and the 20-kilometer men's event replaced the 10-kilometer walk in 1956. A 10-kilometer women's race walk was added in 1992 and this was replaced by a 20K event in 2000.

With the introduction of race-walking to the Olympics attention turned to the loose "fair heel and toe" rule. The concept of unbroken contact with the ground became accepted, but it was not until 1928 that the IAAF defined race-walking as a "progression by steps so taken that unbroken contact with the ground is maintained".

Despite Australia and New Zealand adopting a requirement that the leg straighten during the stride early in the 20th century it was not until the Melbourne Olympics that the IAAF included it in the rules. The rules were further tweaked in 1972 to require that during each stride the supporting leg must be straight in the vertical upright position.

This change was supposed to make it easier for judges to actually see a straight leg in races where the speed was increasing rapidly. Speed continued to increase of course and a further change was made in 1996 to what are now the current rules that require that the advancing leg shall be straightened from the moment of first contact with the ground until the vertical upright position.