

VIC MILLER REMINISCENCES ON THE MEXICAN REVOLUTIONARIES

Readers of this newsletter will know Vic Miller's name in the context of racewalking stamps. Vic is one of the experts on whom I call when I am reviewing walking related philatelic matters. But Vic is a sports enthusiast in his own right, and has put together his own reminiscences on the Mexican racewalking revolution.

For my friend Down Under, Tim Erickson, who once took a walk and never stopped...

Marche de Mexico

In 1958 an Englishman named John Velzian was hired as a physical education officer for Kenya, overseeing athletics in the emerging African country's school system. With an emphasis on track, Velzian began to tap a reservoir of natural runners. Before the end of the British Empire and Commonwealth Games in August of 1966, Kenya, the young independent country, had come of age in track.

Given the fanaticism for futbol and a seemingly inexhaustive supply of inexhaustive participants, it was only a matter of time that a similar breakthrough in track would occur in the land of the Aztlán. Just a little over two months prior to the opening of the aforementioned '66 British Empire and Commonwealth Games, seven foreigners had been inserted into Mexico with a vision of giving the host nation of the next Summer Olympics some athletes to cheer about. One of these coaches, **Jerzy Hausleber**, assembled a half dozen hopefuls. Of Hausleber's six students, his proverbial prize pupil was soon identified. **Jose Pedraza Zuniga**, a soldier in the enlisted ranks of the Mexican army who was pushing thirty years old, was as unlikely a person to pin a medal hope on as was his discipline: race walking!

Jose Pedraza, though, quickly established himself as someone worthy of Jerzy Hausleber's focus. In only July of that first year of the Hausleber/Pedraza combination, a gold medal was realized at the 10th Central American and Caribbean Games. The next July, Jose Pedraza earned a silver medal in the 20 kilometers walk at the 1967 Pan American Games. Sure, the Pan-Am Games weren't comparable to the IAAF World Race Walking Cup, but Jerzy Hausleber still had a good fourteen months to work with Pedraza before the '68 Games arrived. There was something else that Hausleber had at his disposal, and it was the same thing John Velzian had been naturally exploiting with his Kenyan runners: high altitude! Mexico City and its upcoming fall fiesta occupied 7,000+ feet of thinner air.

While there wasn't much question about the aerobic advantage that Jose Pedraza would enjoy at los Juegos de la XIX Olimpiada, there was plenty pause where his style was concerned. The contributing staff of Sports Illustrated put a bronze chip down on Pedraza for the 20-KM. walk but cautiously wondered how "...his unusual stride..." would fare.

On October 14, 1968, the exciting and very real possibility of seeing the first athlete win an Olympic medal in track and field for Mexico and in Mexico City, no less, resonated throughout the Estadio Olimpico Universitario. Mexico's El Sargento Pedraza would most certainly thrill the assembled multitude. Jose Pedraza thrilled 'em, alright, but not before giving the passionate throng an early "thrill" when he was semi-unshoed! After getting his sneaker back on, Pedraza gave determined chase, and it wasn't too long before he'd got himself right back in the pack of it. After approximately an hour and a half out in the streets, Pedraza plunged down the tunnel leading to the track and gave determined chase yet again. He got himself in between the 1-2 finishers of the 1967 IAAF World Race Walking Cup, Nikolay Smaga and Vladimir Golubnichiy, respectively. Despite edging on running - Smaga is said to have animated disapproval of the Mexican's loco motion, Pedraza just could not overtake the unyielding Golubnichiy.



Viva la Revolucion

Jose Pedraza returned to the Estadio Olimpico Universitario three days later for the 50 kilometers walk, but a combination of the altitude, the hot 'n' humid climate of Mexico City and the longer walk's intimidating distance proved too much even for Mexico's foot soldier. Pedraza had to be content with having averaged a fifth place for the two walks.

It didn't matter, or rather, it did. Jerzy Hausleber recruited some younger athletes who had symbolically picked up the sombreros left for Jose Pedraza before the cheers from Estadio Olimpico Universitario had died, furthering Pedraza's frantic finish. His silver would eventually take on the hue of gold as a revolution in race walking's seeds had been dispersed in Mexico.

By the mid-1970s, Jerzy Hausleber's "revolutionaries" had developed a fast, flexible style of race walking, and were threatening an "overthrow" of the more muscular Europeans.

Because the 1975 IAAF World Race Walking Cup conflicted with the seventh Pan American Games, which were held in Mexico City, the official challenge to race walking's status quo by the upstart Mexicans would have to wait until the 1976 Summer Olympics.

Bob Bowman, Track & Field News' resident race walking expert then, picked the terrific trio of **Daniel Bautista, Raul Gonzalez** and **Domingo Colin** to dominate the 20km walk at those '76 Games. Conversely, Bowman largely minimized another threesome in his same pre-race analysis, the DDR!?! Odd, as the three East Germans - Peter Frenkel, Karl-Heinz Stadtmuller and Hans-Georg Reimann - had a much more proven record in "Test matches" than the Mexicans and each also had produced at least one fast time of their own in 1976 leading up to the Montreal Olympics. In fact, Stadtmuller and Frenkel had sandwiched world-record holder Bernd Kannenberg on the Lugano podium just the previous October.

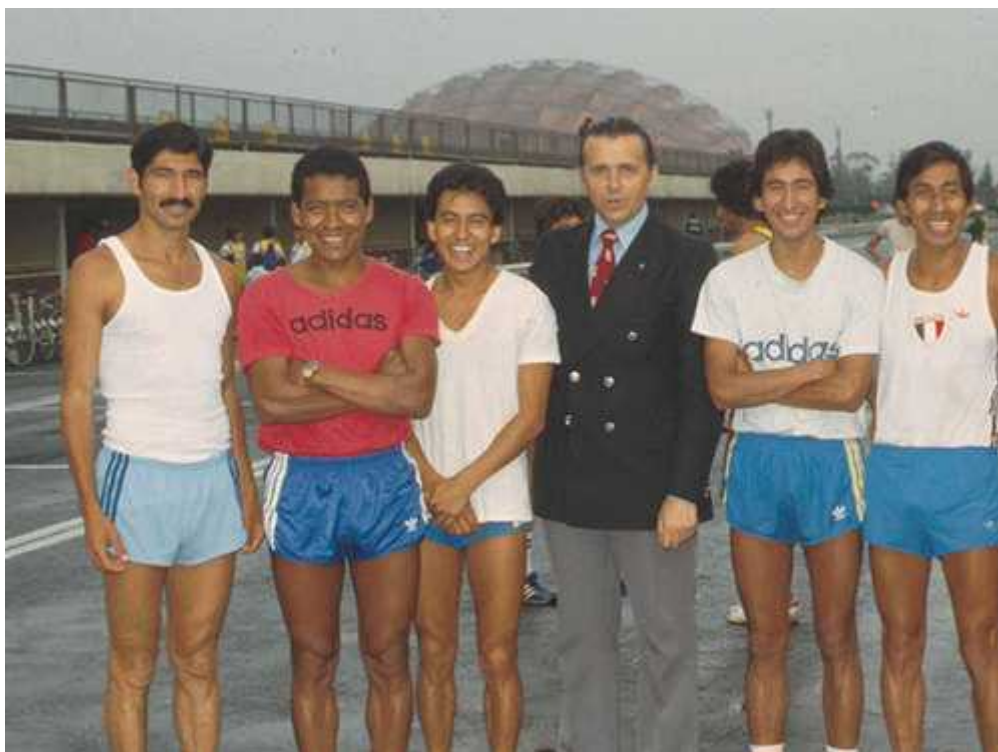
Practically before the smoke from the starter's gun had dissipated at Olympic Stadium, the 20-km walk became a war strictly between the Mexican "revolutionaries" laying siege on the so-called old guard of race walking and East Germany's defense of its European castle. The first casualty of the Battle of Montreal was Raul Gonzalez who later commented that nerves shortened his stride. Another Mexican, Domingo Colin, soon received the axe. Now, only the favorite, Daniel Bautista, remained in the fight. Three-thousand meters from the end, Bautista accelerated, leaving the power trio of Reimann, Frenkel and Stadtmuller to finish 2-3-4 in orderly German fashion. Mexico had its first gold medal in Olympic track and field. A photo or photos of Daniel Bautista airborne during the Montreal walk prompted East German complaint, but the gold remained around Bautista's neck. Perhaps officials had taken into consideration the plight of Domingo Colin. His disqualification earlier in the race was called into question by those who'd seen Colin moving with a fair gait. Perhaps the logic was there may have been a different winner, but not a different nationality.



1976 Olympic 20km - Domingo Colin, Daniel Bautista, Karl-Heinz Stadtmuller (towering behind Bautista), Peter Frenkel, Hans-Georg Reimann (obscured) and Raul Gonzalez

The Mexicans' missteps at Montreal presumably produced some doubt as to whether they could stop clocks sooner at the grand affairs as well.

The 1977 IAAF World Race Walking Cup removed doubt. Well, mostly anyway. Recent record-setter on the track in the 50-km walk, **Enrique Vera**, faltered at Milton Keynes. Nevertheless, the Mexicans went one and two at both distances, giving Mexico its first team Lugano Trophy. Raul Gonzalez's first place in the 50-km walk became his trademark way of winning - or losing, which was mostly the case that season. The Lugano was the only 50 Gonzalez finished that year!! Setting a frightening pace for the first forty percent of the race, he managed to hold on despite fatigue and a late-race challenge from teammate **Pedro Aroche**. If Raul Gonzalez's predecessor at 50-KM greatness was the Kannenberg Express, then Gonzalez's "mode of transportation" was the Tijuana Taxi. His suicidal romps through the streets left only the bravest racewalkers struggling to stay aboard. One of these brave men was **Martin Bermudez**. At the 1979 World Race Walking Cup, Raul Gonzalez walked the first 20 kilometers in an insane 1:25:03, only to succumb to the effects of his own pace as Martin Bermudez and two others walked on by. Bermudez's time, 3:43:36, was extremely fast in the context of a championship meet in that day and emblematic of the Flying Feets of The Lugano to which that '79 World Race Walking Cup became known.



Coach Jerzy Hausleber with Raul Gonzalez Daniel Bautista, Ernesto Canto and others from the Mexican squad

Moscow es Waterloo

The 1980 Summer Olympics saw a United States-led boycott in protest of the Soviet-Afghan War. Possibly driven by "Yanqui, Go Home!" defiance, Mexico chose to attend. After the pair of '80 Games' walks were over, the Mexican foursome that made the trip may have found themselves wishing their country had boycotted as well.

The 1979 IAAF World Race Walking Cup's hyper-fast times were still all too fresh in the minds of officials when Moscow's summer came, so race walking officiating was hyper-vigilant. Strident about strides, judges raised 136 caution flags during the 20 km cleanup! Seven walkers were red-flagged - including two of the Mexicans, Domingo Colin and Daniel Bautista as he neared the end of his bid for a defense of his Olympic title while out in front.

The 50 km walk was an absolute holocaust for the Mexican squad. The heat and humidity of the USSR's capital put a third of the field down - including Bautista, Martin Bermudez and Raul Gonzalez.

The fleet-footed gods of Teotihuacan were mortal after all.

La Redencion

Sadly, Daniel Bautista retired in disappointment after the Moscow Games. Even without him, though, the Mexicans carried on in their fluid style.

Soon, **Ernesto Canto** revealed himself to be Daniel Bautista's successor at 20 kilometers. Canto took the 1981 IAAF World Race Walking Cup and two years later beat rival Josef Pribilinec in a squeaker at the inaugural World Championships in Athletics. Raul Gonzalez, long the veteran of Mexican race walking teams, kept going long enough to match Christoph Hohne's record of three Lugano victories and mount both the podiums at the 1984 Summer Olympics - a close second to Ernesto Canto followed by a gold in his specialty - for the greatest overall meet triumph of any walker up through that time.



Ernesto Canto (20km) and Raul Gonzales (50km) win twin golds in the 1984 Olympics

Detractors to Mexican success at the '84 Games can cite the lack of Eastern Europeans present in '84 Los Angeles, which was due to a retaliatory boycott by the Soviet Union, but are only partially sure-footed. Both Canto and Gonzalez had obviously demonstrated their ability to beat Eastern Bloc walkers in past meets, and both of them yielded competitive times in 1984 L.A. There was something extra(s) that Ernesto Canto and Raul Gonzalez could draw from against any comers in the Ciudad de Angeles that Olympics. Los Angeles somewhat mirrored Mexico City. Elements such as smog and a heavy Mexican population meant that Canto and Gonzalez felt right at home.



April 2008 - Jerzy Hausleber and his wife with Mexican medallists Miguel Rodriguez, Ernesto Canto, Raul Gonzales and Daniel Bautista

The story of the Mexican racewalkers is obviously open-ended. Jose Pedraza's silver-coated walk never really ended...