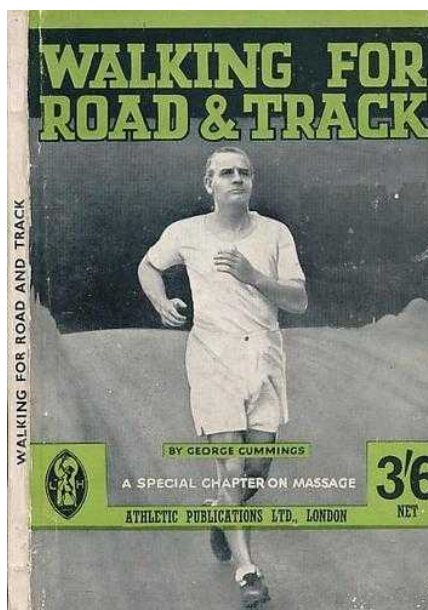


GEORGE CUMMINGS – THE LAST OF THE PROFESSIONALS

Amongst my many walking related books is a small 86 page hardcopy book, written by an English walker named George Cummings and published in 1924.¹



Cummings is noted in Egon Rasmussen's and Palle Lassen's 1980 Race Walking World Statistics handbook² as having set a new world best for the 1 Mile Walk (6:22.0) in London on 4th August 1913. The 'p' annotation next to his entry indicates he was regarded as a professional athlete, hence his performance could not be recorded as a World Best Performance (WBP) or a World Record (WR).

One mile				
6.48,0	WBP	Thomas Griffith	GBR	6.8. 1870 Leeds
6.36,0	WBP	Harry Webster	GBR	12.7. 1879 Preston
p 6.23,0		William Perkins	GBR	1.6. 1874 London/Ll.Bridge
6.33,4	WBP	Eric Merrild	USA	15.10.1880 Boston
6.29,6	WBP	Frank Murray	USA	27.10.1883 New York
p 6.27,25		Mike Cann	AUS	26.12.1886 Melbourne
6.27,6	WBP	Frank Creamer	NZL	20.11.1897 Auckland
6.26,0	WBP	George Larnar	GBR	13.7. 1904 Manchester
6.00,0	(1)	Albert Yeomans	GBR	1.9. 1906 Swansea
6.25,8	WR	George Goulding	CAN	4.6. 1910 Toronto
6.23,0	*	George Goulding	CAN	10.6. 1911 Toronto
6.22,8	*	Edward McDonald	CAN	7.7. 1911 Toronto
6.22,2	*	William Murray	AUS	24.2. 1912 Melbourne
p 6.22,0		George Cummings	GBR	4.8. 1913 London
6.22,0	*	Colvin Patrick	TRI	1928 Port of Spain
6.21,2	WR	Pauls Bernhards	LAT	25.7. 1936 London
6.18,2	WBP	Athol Stubbs	AUS	25.2. 1939 Sydney
6.15,2	WBP	Athol Stubbs	AUS	17.2. 1940 Sydney
6.15,2	WBP	Valdemar Grandy	LAT	28.8. 1943 Riga
p 6.04,9		William Mihalo	USA	17.2. 1953 St.Petersburgh
p 6.03,8		William Mihalo	USA	21.2. 1954 Detroit
6.10,4	WBP	David Romansky	USA	2.5. 1970 Quantico
6.09,0	WBP	Roger Mills	GBR	13.9. 1974 London
6.05,3	WBP	Roberto Buccione	ITA	25.3. 1976 Ostia
5.59,2	WBP	Todd Scully	USA	7.6. 1977 Seattle
5.56,3	WBP	Reima Salonen	FIN	12.6. 1977 Naantali
5.55,3	WBP	Roberto Buccione	ITA	4.4. 1979 Ostia
5.49,9	WBP	Erling Andersen	NOR	26.8. 1980 Lisleby
5.45,15	WBP	Martin Toporek	AUT	11.9. 1982 BsZ Züdstadt

1) Doubtful. Not accepted. In 1906 Albert Yeomans also made 6.15,0 and 6.19,6, but both had been doubtful as well.

1 Second hand copies of this book can still be sourced. See <https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?sts=t&an=&tn=walking+for+road+and+track&kn=&isbn=&sortBy=93>

2 Danish statisticians Egon Rasmussen and Palle Lassen published many racewalking related books in the 1970's and 1980's. Their contributions included yearly world statistics almanacs, all-time best lists, ranking lists and world record progression lists. Lassen was also an IAAF racewalking judge and a member of the IAAF Race Walking Committee for many years.

By way of comparison, the fastest ratified amateur time was then by George Goulding³, Canada's Yorkshire-born Olympic champion of 1912, who had walked 6:25 4/5 in 1910. Cummings's time was not beaten until Pauls Bernhards, of Latvia, improved it marginally to 6:21.2 in London in 1936.

There is a lot more to be said about Cummings apart from this one record listing. I am indebted to Bob Phillips, editor of the National Union of Track Statisticians (NUTS) quarterly newsletter *Track Stats*⁴, for passing on this 1946 article, written by Alan Hoby (1914-2008, who was for 37 years chief sports writer for the "Sunday Express".⁵

Far from the crush of the crowds and the tumult of the tracks

By Alan Hoby

One day 33 years ago – when beer was three pence a pint and fresh eggs a halfpenny each – a man went walking. He walked so fast that when he stopped he had smashed a 39-year-old record. The crowd cheered. The sun shone ... and so it went down in the record-books that at Weaste, Manchester, on August 4 1913 the World's wonder walker, George Cummings, had done a mile in 6 minutes 22 seconds. Today that wonderful time still stands. It has withstood the assaults of all the champions

But the man who made it is old and bent. Victim of a stroke which has paralysed the iron legs that once brought him fame, he can barely hobble along with a stick; The sun no longer shines on George Cummings. When I saw the great old-timer who was already 36 when he walked the famous mile, he told me, "*I had only switched from running the year before. I got £50 for becoming World's professional champion. I trained on steak, ham, eggs, butter and malted milk*".

Now, far from the crush of the crowd and the tumult of the tracks, this ex-boilermaker, ex-Guardsman, boxer and runner lives in a modest room in Maida Vale, West London, managing somehow on his rations.

He was 23 when he set out on his first long-distance walk, Hartlepool to Hull, which he completed in 32 hours. Yet when he was 51, the "old man" was still breaking records. He covered almost 8¼ miles in the hour, beating the previous record, held by the American, Meagher, by 43½ yards. On that pioneering "hike" to Hull, George arrived "broke". Chancing on a boxing-booth run by the English lightweight champion, Frank Guest, he accepted a challenge to go four rounds for £1 and went the whole way with Will English. Afterwards, he travelled with the booth.

In 1921, on the hottest day in 30 years, George did his most notable trek, London to Edinburgh. Despite the heat Cummings, who in the Great War was gassed, blinded and had trench fever, arrived in Edinburgh in 82 hours of actual walking, averaging some 42 miles a day. He thinks modern athletes are "wonderful" but believes that climate has a lot to do with the record-breaking feats of Swedish streaks Hagg and Andersson. "*I was lucky*", he said. "*I could maintain speed for hours at a time and the crowds used to line the routes to see me pass*".

Salute, then, George Cummings, still at 68 the champion of champions!

Born around 1875 in Yorkshire, Cummings has been put forward as the last of the professional footmen; ie the last to earn his living from his prowess as a walker. Part showman and part athlete he was shunned by the amateur sporting organisations of the time and operated outside the formal athletics channels, walking for wagers or to advertise products for his sponsors.

For this reason, he could never become an English Centurion (by walking 100 miles within 24 hours in one of their events like London to Brighton and return)⁶. Professionals could not compete against amateurs in those days of strict amateurism.

His 1924 book (see above) contains sections on training, foot care and self-massage (the biggest section) and finishes with personal anecdotes from his various walks. It lists his records as follows

- Walked 1 Mile in 6 mins. 22 secs (1913)
- London-Edinburgh, 420 miles in 82 hours 5 mins (1921)
- London-York, 200 miles in 37 hours (1923)
- Walked 8 miles 345 yards in 1 hour at age of 51 (1926)

3 See <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wo-george-goulding.pdf>

4 See <http://www.nuts.org.uk/trackstats/index.htm>

5 Bob Phillips advises that the article by Alan Hoby was one he found in the scrapbook belonging to the late Norman Graves, of Wirral AC, and passed on to him by Maurice Morrell.

6 See <http://www.centurions1911.org.uk/index.html>

- London-Burton, 135 miles in 23 hours 50 mins (1930)
- London-Leeds, 202¼ miles in 39 hours 30 mins
- Walked 14½ miles in 2 hours age age of 56 (1931)

His career could be split into two periods – pre WWI and post WWI. His first significant walk was in 1913 when he recorded his exception 1 mile walk. It would not be until 1921, after his time as a soldier, that he returned to the spotlight, with the first of his long distance walks, done at 46 years of age.

While his 1 Mile, 1 Hour and 2 Hour walks were obviously continuous efforts, his long distance walks were not, but you have to read between the lines of his book to confirm this. For instance, when talking of his London to Edinburgh walk on page 82, he comments: “*Incidentally, I did my walk to Edinburgh on 82 hours of actual walking, an average of just over 5½ miles an hour.*” In other parts of the book, he talks of his overnight stays at pubs, etc, when en route.

This becomes obvious when you consider some of these performances which were impossibly good for that era. His 200 miles in 37 hours would probably be a world best, even today. Similarly his 135 miles (217km) in 23 hrs 50 mins is not far short of the current world best.



16th May 1924: Cummings in training for his 200 mile race against a man on horseback. The horse is allowed to trot or gallop, but Cummings must walk. He hopes to prove that a man is capable of greater endurance than a horse over a long distance. (Photo by Kirby/Topical Press Agency/Getty Images)

What is not in doubt if that he was a fine walker who kept competing to an advanced age.

There are a number of newsreel sequences of him in action from the 1920s onwards in the British Pathé website, including an amusing 1929 video in which he is teaching 3 elegantly-robed West End stage actresses the art of “Heel and Toe”. By then he was rather more portly in girth and aged 54 years.

1923 London to York (200 miles)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evy12XKsFrY>

1930 London to Burton (135 miles):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rk6ZerL9DOQ>

1929 Teaching some actresses to walk:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_gsiwXxyTE8

1931 20 Miles in 3 Hours at Paddington:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Yf3f3yOmH0>

Viewing the 1931 film indicates that Cummings would not have passed muster at that time in a properly judged walking race. Early on, his form is very questionable. Footage of him in the latter half of the race shows good form, albeit at a slower pace. Not surprisingly, Rasmussen and Lassen do not acknowledge any of his later performance. By that stage of his life Cummings was promoting various milk-based food products, whiskey and other products or racing horses over long distances, and his performances, although great for his age, were not serious athletic endeavours.

There are also plenty of photos on the web, but all are from the 1920s and onwards, when he was an older walker. Interestingly, most are now owned by Getty Images and on sale for \$200 (small) / \$650 (large). Ouch!

- <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/21/the-queen-at-90-britain-in-1926-in-pictures/walking-champion-george-cummings-in-training-for-a-1000-mile-wal/>
- <https://www.gettyimages.ac/detail/news-photo/george-cummings-the-worlds-professional-walking-champion-at-news-photo/106889478>
- <https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/mr-george-cummings-the-worlds-professional-walking-champion-news-photo/106889485>
- <https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/walking-champion-george-cummings-sets-out-on-a-135-mile-news-photo/3163520>
- <https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/walking-champion-george-cummings-teaching-three-actresses-news-photo/3397291>

His feats did attract a lot of attention in England at the time. The following photo shows a large crowd gathered to witness the start of his walk from London to Burton.



13th November 1930: Walking champion George Cummings sets out on a 135 mile walk from Trafalgar Square in London to Burton, with no sustenance other than beer, in order to prove its sustaining properties. (Photo by J. A. Hampton/Topical Press Agency/Getty Images)

If Cummings had been walking 50 years earlier, in the heyday of pedestrianism, he would be much better known and would have had the ability to set himself up for life financially. Alas, amateurism had taken centre stage in the post WWI era and people like him chipped around the edges to earn a few bob here and there.

Gone but not forgotten.

Tim Erickson
29 March 2020