

CELEBRATING THE 50K AND THE YOUNG BRONZE AGE 1965-1980

By Paul F. DeMeester

We may have to reach back to our student days to reminisce about the Bronze Age, that prehistoric period a few thousand years ago, a time characterized by the use of bronze and early features of civilization. This article reaches for the history books, to ancient times when the 50K race walk was a feature of civilization and one United States walker sculpted bronze in the event and in his professional life.

The U.S. Navy had a profound effect on this Midwesterner from Missouri. A high school miler, he joined the Navy upon graduation. The Navy assigned him to cast bronze and aluminum on a repair ship. It also gave him a taste of the West Coast, home to many naval ports, where he settled in Southern California, then home to a thriving race walking community. Casting metals and pursuing podium metals would become intertwined. The Navy gave life to the old American saying: "Go West, Young Man." In this case, that man was Young, **Larry Young**.

Young got his race walk start in an all-comers 1-mile race in the Los Angeles area in 1965. He was hooked. By the start of the 1966 season, on February 10 to be exact, Young was ready for prime time. In a 1-mile indoor race at the prestigious LA Times meet, he managed third place behind one U.S. Olympian (**Ron Laird**) but ahead of one other U.S. Olympian (**Rudy Haluza**) and three future ones (**Larry Walker, Tom Dooley and Goetz Klopfer**). More local races followed, over longer distances: a 10K three days later (51:54); a 20K two months later (1:43:00); and a 35K not even three months on (3:12:57).

Young's breakthrough moment came in his home state that year, more particularly in his future hometown (to this day) of Columbia, Missouri, when on Independence Day (July 4), the man from Independence came in second in the National 30K Championship race in the blazing heat (3:01:12). The 23-year old had made a splash in the mile early in the year and had now found his niche: long distance walking. By fall, he knocked exactly 11 minutes off his 30K time in a local race, before putting his stamp on the event he made his own: the 50K.

The 1966 U.S. National 50K Championship was held on October 31 in Chicago. Larry won his first national 50K title there, the first of eight in his career, out of the eight in which he participated. Young was never defeated in a 50K race on home soil. His winning time in 1966 of 4:38:24 was less than three minutes slower than the best ever in the United States at the time. Not bad for a first race at the distance. Accentuating his ascendancy, Young beat Canadian Olympic 50K star **Alex Oakley** by almost five minutes. Even more impressive when one considers that Young was working a full-time job that had required almost double overtime in the two weeks before the race.

Young returned to Chicago about seven months later, to repeat his 50K title in the heat (83°F at the start; 88°F at the finish), improving his time to 4:33:03 and earning a berth for the Pan Am Games. Those Games were held in Winnipeg, Canada, during the Summer of Love in 1967. 50K Love indeed for Young, who walked away with gold in 4:26:20, the best in the Western Hemisphere at the time. In the race, he overhauled fast-starting **Jose Pedraza** (Mexico) at 20K. Pedraza would race to a memorable 20K silver at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics, in a famed duel with winner **Vladimir Golubnichy** inside the Estadio Olímpico Universitario. But staying with 1967 for the moment, the world had learned of Larry Young. More was to come.

The Pan American Games became Young's gold mine but not without controversy. In the 1967 race, he was given a soft drink instead of the tea he wanted. Did someone wish him ill? Young won anyway, even though he slowed to a 1-hour final 10K. In 1971, Young successfully defended his title by 15 seconds from **Gabriel Hernandez** (Mexico), after team members encountered shower rats (real ones) and fleas at the substandard team hotel in Cali, Colombia. But the worst happened in Mexico City in 1975, when Young contested the Pan Am Games 20K. Young and U.S. teammate **Todd Scully** were physically impeded and spat upon by unrestrained spectators. Young was awarded bronze, behind the two Mexican walkers. This is not to say that Young would have won his third Pan Am gold, as winner **Daniel Bautista** went on to win Olympic 20K gold in Montreal a year later, but Young might have had a fighting chance. Instead, the locals fought him down to bronze.

Fortunately, Young has better memories about a bronze medal in Mexico City, from when he placed third in a grueling October race in the heat and 7,000 feet-plus altitude of the Mexican capital during the 1968 Olympic Games. The course was a modified out and back, going 10K in one direction, then back near the Olympic Stadium (start/finish) and towards the other direction until 32K, when the long trek back to the finish line began. The competitors could see one another on long stretches where they would pass each other on opposite sides of the road. Young and his U.S. teammates came well prepared, having trained for weeks on end at the high altitudes of South Lake Tahoe and Colorado.

Young acquitted himself well by winning his training races, including a 30K track race in 2:27:46. But the last set of high altitude races was not just for training. The top ten in each of the Nationals were invited to compete for the six

Olympic spots. Young had prequalified by taking second in the 20K National (1:33:05) and winning the 50K National (4:12:12) in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park without a flower in his hair - Young's long hair and beard would have to wait until Munich for their Olympic debut.



*Left: Clean cut Larry Young on the right during 1968 Mexico City podium ceremony next to winner Christoph Hohne
Right: Looking more like an artist at 1972 Olympics*

Young posted negative splits in the cool Frisco weather to win his third consecutive 50K title. The top eight in that race beat 4:30:00 and the 13th-placer finished in 4:39:31. This was U.S 50K Nationals at their best (don't forget to compare those times against those from 1968, not 2016).

At the actual Olympic Trials in Alamosa, Colorado, Young earned berths in both the 20 and 50Ks, placing respectively third (1:38:40) and first (4:34:18). Young decided to concentrate on the 50K, however, and ceded his 20K spot to Dooley. That concentration paid off. Because the course was not the 2K loop that we are used to these days, it was hard for any of the walkers or spectators to know who was still in the race during the last 18K. Of the 36 starters, there were seven non-finishers and one DQ. Among the DNFs were 1964 gold and silver medalists **Abdon Pamich** (Italy) and **Paul Nihill** (Britain). When Young entered the stadium in third place, he could hardly believe it. He was not the only happy Youngster in the stadium. Turns out, his parents and sister had driven 1,800 miles in three days to bear witness to Larry's triumph.

Four years on, the Young family was able to replicate the exact same Olympic experience, with one difference. At the 1972 Olympic Games, Young did the double. He felt it helped him in the 50K to have contested the 20K three days earlier, this time without the Central American heat and height. Young was the top U.S. 20K walker in 10th place. Perfect tune-up for the 50K, in which race he passed through 10K in 12th. By 20K, Young was fourth.

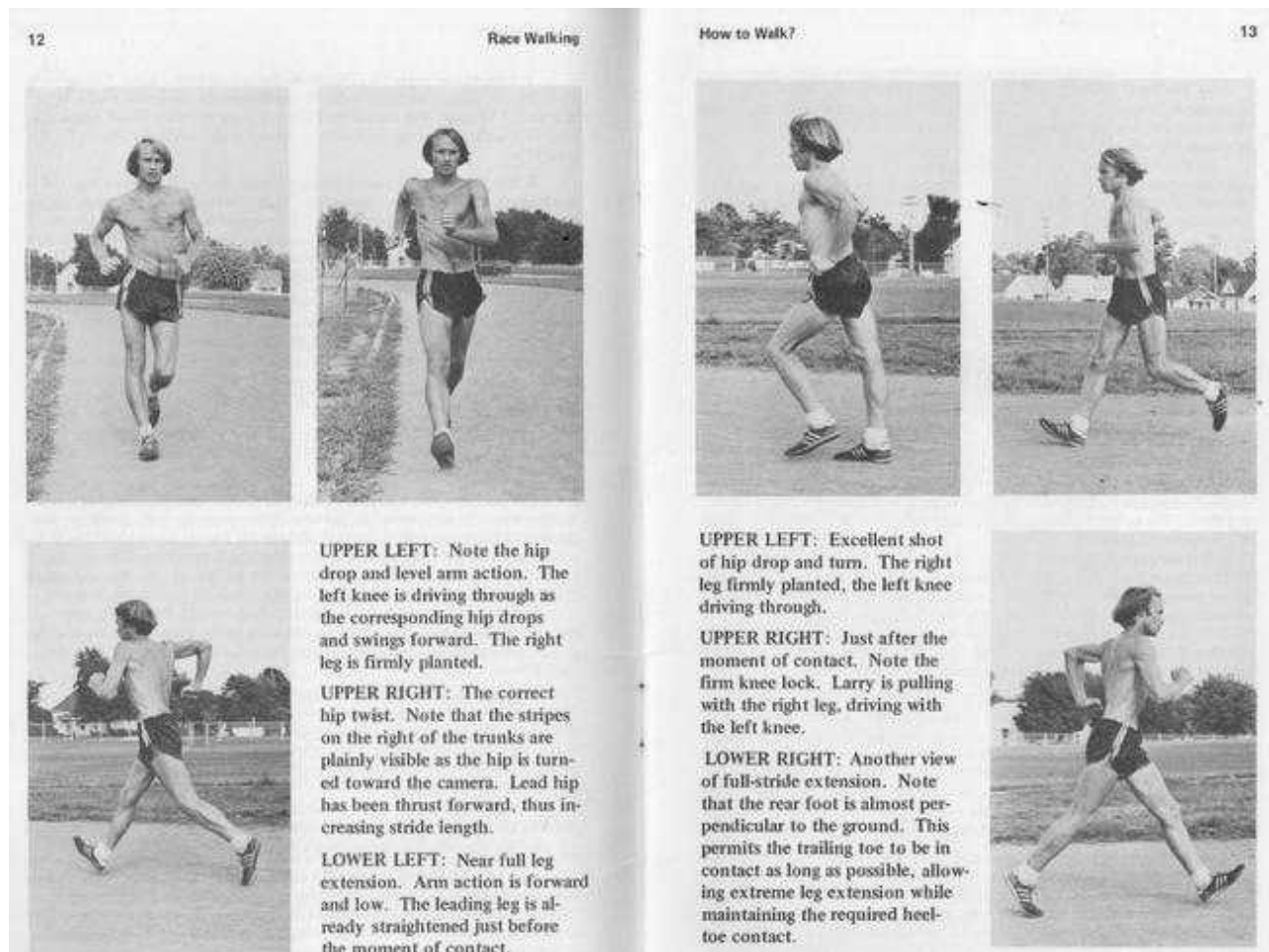


Young Overtakes 1968 Olympic Champion Christoph Hohne in Munich Olympic 50K

He soon noticed that third-place **Sergey Grigoryev** (Soviet Union) looked to be in trouble. Shortly into the second half of the race, Young passed him to move into a podium position. Over the next 10K, Young gained on eventual winner **Bernd Kannenberg** (West Germany) and runner-up **Venyamin Soldatenko** (Soviet Union) but the German was thinking along the same lines and accelerated away from the Soviet and out of reach of the pursuing American. Still, Young would post a career best 4:00:46 for his second Olympic bronze medal and a new U.S. record.

His second Olympic year was Larry Young's best ever: a repeat Olympic bronze; a successful Olympic double; and eight national titles that year alone, out of 30 national championships he would win in his career (anywhere from 2 miles to 100 miles). His bevy of 1972 national crowns included 5K, 10K, 15K, 20K, 25K, 30K, 35K and 40K. And that's not counting his 1972 Olympic Trials wins in the 20K (1:35:56) and 50K (4:13:04) in Eugene, Oregon, the U.S. track capital that will host next year's World Athletics Championships, not to mention Young's 1972 U.S. 20K record of 1:30:09 set on a track.

What is it that made Larry Young so successful? Besides talent and hard work, of course. There are a number of things that stand out, not necessarily in the order presented herein. First, his form. When early in his career, Young was disqualified, he figured out he had to correct his form. He took half a year to work on just technique. It paid off. His form became perfection (the race walk rule has changed since). The Ohio Race Walker, the premier news source for race walking in the U.S. for five decades, called him, "the stylish Young." The videos made by Young's dad Bob of the 1968 and 1972 Olympic races prove the point (see source list below). Young was not just in his dad's videos for memento purposes. They both studied film *ad nauseam* long before teenagers became YouTubers.



The Stylish Young

Goetz Klopfer, his Olympic teammate, spent a lot of time in Young's company and notes that Young had a high amount of hip drop on one side combined with lots of shoulder drop on the other side. It allowed Young to maintain his c.g. at a constant "altitude" throughout the entire stride. It made Young look very smooth and very efficient, says Klopfer, himself 10th in the 1968 Olympic 50K race. Also, Klopfer and Young went to the Puma shoe factory in Germany just prior to the Munich Games after leaving training camp in Oslo. Klopfer was thus able to gain some insight into Young's habit of putting hard plastic heel cups in his racing shoes to spread the impact load on his heel. This created an unusual

wear pattern on Young's shoes, says Goetz. The most wear on Larry's shoes was in the center of the shoe heel. The perimeter was unworn. For most other walkers, the most wear would be at the trailing edge of the heel, not the center.

Second, Young was religious about his exercise program. Long before gyms became fashionable, Young was completing his stretches as part of his training. A recent interview with the wife of Novak Djokovic reminded me of Young. Asked what Djokovic does when not on the tennis court, his spouse replied that he always stretches everywhere, from the moment they pass through the hotel door while on circuit. The Grand Slam Champ may not know the Show-Me-Stater (Missouri's nickname) but they both know what it takes. Klopfer calls Young as "extremely flexible" back in the day. During the three-day interval between the 20 and 50Ks at the 1972 Munich Olympics, all Young did was stretch.



Novak Djokovic, today's equivalent of Larry Young, in Tokyo with Belgium's Olympic gymnastics gold medalist Nina Derwael

Third, Young paid close attention to what he ate and drank. Nowadays, sports stars have nutritionists, physios, sports psychologists etc. to help attain success. But in the late 1960s, Young was figuring these things out on his own. At the Munich Games, Young walked a hard 20K race for glycogen depletion, followed by a carbo rich diet for three days. A medal diet, if you will.

Fourth, Young would take time off from race walking for long stretches of time (without offense to his stretching program). He did so after both Olympic Games he contested. Time off meant like a year or two. His 1972 results demonstrate the wisdom of his sabbatical. His June 12, 1971 win in the 50K National (4:18:29) was his first race at his favorite distance since the Mexico Olympics.

Fifth, Young had a life outside of race walking. But not without a direct link to his sport. Young managed to score a full athletic scholarship at Columbia College in his native Missouri. It allowed Young to study his favorite topic, art. Combined with his casting skills, once graduated, Young settled down in his college town where he has been a successful sculptor for the last five decades. His bronze works, many of them monumental in size, grace locations from the U.S. to Australia, Japan and Germany. Is it a coincidence that all these places have figured greatly in the history of the 50K?



Young's art is perfectly legal: no loss of contact and no bent knees

Sixth, Young focused on the big races. Even though he raced a lot, he worked up to the major competitions. Once there, he shined.



Young Bathing in Steeple Chase Pool after 1972 Trials race

Young planned on a third and fourth Olympics. No doubt he would have achieved that aim, but the Olympic 50K was axed for 1976 and the United States boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Young would have made the 1976 Olympics had there been a 50K, given that he qualified for the inaugural World Championship 50K, the replacement race for the missing Montreal 50K. Young might have made the U.S. Olympic 20K team for Montreal 1976 if it had not been for illness and injury that plagued him. He missed a 20K spot by only one place at the Trials on June 19. Two months later, Young won the 50K National (4:11:08) and a ticket to race in Sweden, where the first Worlds 50K was held. Young finished in 21st, with Australia's **Willi Sawall** and **Tim Erickson** (that name rings a bell, doesn't it) right behind him.

Young was not done yet. His final national title over 50K was earned in 1977 (4:19:58). It booked him his second trip to the Lugano Cup, the predecessor to the current World Athletics Race Walking Team Championships. Bothered by a pulled hamstring, Young was only two seconds off his nationals time for 13th place. He was the top-U.S. finisher. By 1980, Young the artist was looking forward to a trip to the reinstated 50K at the Moscow Olympics as Moscow sports many art museums. It was not to be. Young decided not to compete in the U.S. Olympic Trials in light of his nation's Olympic boycott. He retired that same year.

Larry's Legacy Looms Large. He is the best race walker the United States has ever had. **Joseph Pearman** (10K silver) and **Richard Remer** (3K bronze) medaled in my Olympic hometown in 1920 (Antwerp) but Young medaled twice in a much tougher event. Young was versatile, excelling anywhere from an indoor mile to an indoor 100 miles.

Excuse me, an indoor 100 miles? Not that the indoor aspect was premeditated, willful and deliberate. Not at all. An all-day, torrential downpour on September 18, 1971, meant that Young's first race of more than 50K was moved indoors to a 220-yard dirt track in Columbia, Missouri. Young apparently did not mind and set a U.S. best for the 100 miles in 18 hours, seven minutes and 12 seconds. He covered the last two miles in less than 8 minutes. Wow!

Towards the end of Young's race walking career in 1979, his 1972 20K time was still the fifth best ever posted by a U.S. walker. That same year, of the ten best U.S. 50K times, five were Young's. Out of twenty best, eight were his. Young's art resembles his race walking: preparation, technical competence and artistry.

Looking back, Larry Young is a bit surprised the 50K has lasted as long as it did, given the repeated attacks on its existence. When it comes to judging, Young is a big fan of video reviews and a strict no loss of contact rule. Young does not like that walkers are off the ground. The human eye is incapable of seeing loss of contact that is less than approximately 30 milliseconds. The current loss of contact rule ambiguously allows for loss of contact as long as the judges cannot see it with the human eye ["racewalkers must have no visible (to the human eye) loss of contact with the ground"]. Young feels that the new rule (which did not exist in his day) gives walkers a green light to be off the ground. Young would introduce video technology to bring race walkers back down to earth; to accept a flight phase is to defy the definition of what walking is. I wholeheartedly support Young's idea. No more floaters or flyers. Maybe then the 50K will make a comeback, as the shortest distance over which race walking makes sense (in contact with the ground), as opposed to what Klopfer refers to as "stiff-legged running," the current practice at top level.

Back in my heyday as a junior walker in my native Belgium, a local socialist newspaper had an article about my youthful success, calling me the Belgian Soldatenko. I was pleased with the article but would have preferred having been called the Belgian Larry Young, in light of my pro-U.S. leanings (I moved to the U.S. three years later).

It is my privilege and honor to write about Larry Young these many moons later. He epitomized the beauty, competitiveness and toughness of the 50K, the longest ever continuous Olympic sporting event. It has also been my privilege and honor to write for Tim these past four and a half years. Together, we helped save the 2020 Olympic Men's 50K. Together, we helped save a long distance race walk event on the schedule, albeit 15K shorter than we wanted. Together, we helped women gain a foothold or two in some major 50K competitions outside of the sexist Olympics. With Tim's editorial retirement, the best way for me to sign off is by writing about one of the 50K's greatest and finest, Larry Young. I hope I have given him and the 50K credit he and the event deserve. Farewell.

Sources: Ohio Race Walker 1966-1980 (available at <https://racewalk.com/ORW/ohioRaceWalker.php>)

Bob Young video of 1968 Mexico City Olympic 50K: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f12mXeBfktQ>

Bob Young video of 1972 Munich Olympic 50K : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpdtKkdWE6s>

The Art of the Olympians - Sculptor Larry Young: <https://youtu.be/NG2WaYtx1Uo>

Larry Young Website: <http://www.youngsculpture.com/>

Personal Interviews with Larry Young, Goetz Klopfer and Tom Dooley