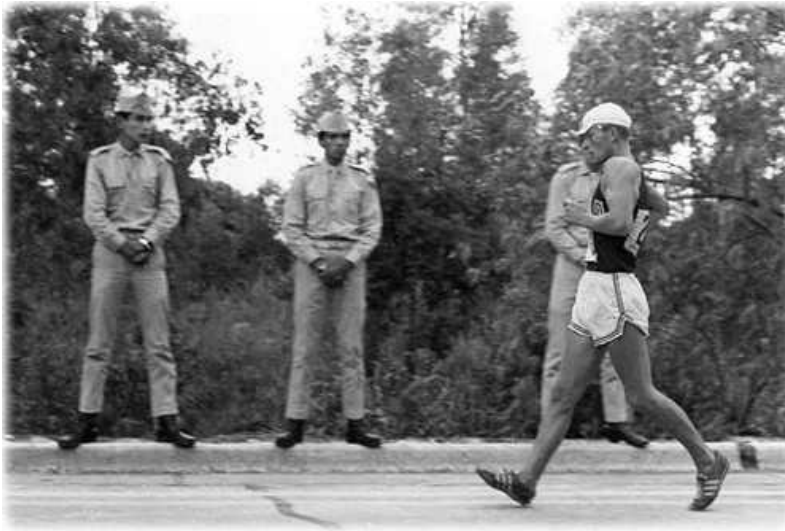


55 YEARS OF RACE WALKING: THE RICH HISTORY OF TOM DOOLEY

By Paul F. DeMeester

Imagine going to your first Olympics as a 22-year old college student and being roommates at the Olympic Village with Tommie Smith and John Carlos, the legendary 200 meter runners who made history when they protested racism and injustice against Blacks in the United States by raising their fists in a Black Power salute on the Olympic podium. Tom Dooley does not have to imagine it. He was their roommate at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. A miler and cross-country runner in his high school and early college days, a fellow team member invited Tom to participate in a 1-mile race walk event at an All-Comers meet in November of 1965. The native San Franciscan won the race and never looked back.



Iconic image of Tom Dooley during Mexico City 1968 Olympics with military cadets lining the route]

Tom was hooked and joined a local race walking club in the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California. By then, he had become a student at San Jose State University, a T&F powerhouse back then in the United States. Tom befriended a fellow race walker who had just moved from the state of Michigan: Goetz Klopfer. Starting in 1966, the two of them started training together while Goetz was a student at Stanford University, just 22 miles away from Tom's campus. The two went to great heights in their sport. Both made the USA Olympic Teams in 1968 (Tom 20K; Goetz 50K) and 1972 (both 20K). Most remarkably, they still train together. Not twice a week, like they used to, because Goetz has moved to Eugene, Oregon, a track mecca in the U.S. But Goetz frequently travels down to the Bay Area to meet up with his long-time training partner. It has been my great privilege to join these two for an occasional 10 miler or dinner; and wonderful to watch their 54-year long friendship forged over their common bond, race walking.



Walking Friends Forever - Goetz Klopfer (left) and Tom at 2015 World Masters in Lyon, France

Encouraged by his 1-mile win and the camaraderie with a number of local race walkers, Tom set out for his first distance venture, the U.S. National 35K Race Walk Championship, held in Southern California on 8 May 1966. Tom was 13th in 3:34:11; four finishers ahead of him would walk at Olympics yet to be held (Ron Laird - by then already an Olympian; Goetz; Larry Young and Larry Walker). Tom would end up making the 20K his main event, as it afforded him ample time to train and pay attention to studies and work as a high school history teacher; and the local race walking scene offered plenty of 20Ks on the schedule. Not that he was shy of the 50K. Not at all. Towards the end of 1966, Tom won the Junior National 50K in 5:15:15, the term “junior” referring not to age but to not having raced in the top echelons. Towards the end of his competitive career, Tom would return to the 50K and set his personal best during that period. But there were plenty of 20K honors in between.

Tom’s second year of race walking proved to be his international break-out year. On 27 May 1967, he braved the Pennsylvania heat to finish third in the National 20K behind winner Ron Laird and Larry Young. It earned Tom his first international selections. It was the Summer of Love in Tom’s native city, when young folks would put flowers in their hair on arriving in San Francisco. Tom’s love of race walking paid dividends that summer. He first represented the United States in the U.S.-British Commonwealth meet, then at the Pan Am Games, where he was one spot off the 20K podium in 1:36:49.8. Two weeks later, Tom won his first national title, over 40K, in a race organized by Elliott Denman, the 1956 50K Olympian. Elliott, a sports journalist by trade, has done so much for race walking in general, and the 50K, including the women’s 50K, in particular, in his career of organizing races, which continues to this day. Tom won the 1967 40K Nationals in 3:30:10. Another milestone that year was Tom’s selection to represent his nation at the Lugano Cup, the forerunner of what is now called the World Race Walking Team Championships. In mid-October 1967, Tom finished 16th in the Lugano 20K in 1:37:21.4, and was the second of three Americans (Ron Laird was third).

In his third year of race walking, Tom made it to the Olympics, a feat he would repeat four years later at the 1972 Munich Olympics. The United States has a very egalitarian way of selecting its national team. The top three at the Trials earn a spot, provided they have met the qualifying standard. In 1968, the trials were a two-step process. The first race was held at sea level. The top ten would graduate to a trials final at high altitude, mimicking the conditions of Mexico City (2,300 meters up or 7,500 feet). Tom placed 4th in both races. The sea level race had 59 starters. Tom finished 39 seconds behind the winner in 1:33:39.2. At high altitude in Colorado, Tom finished in 1:41:03 but made the team because Larry Young, who earned team spots in both the 20 and 50, opted out of the 20K, ceding his spot to Tom. Four years later, Tom would secure his Olympic spot outright, by finishing third at the U.S. Trials, in 1:39:10.



1968 Olympic Trials Finalists in Colorado with Tom on bottom right

At both of his Olympics, Tom finished as the second of the three U.S. 20K walkers. In 1968, Tom was 17th (Rudy Haluza was 4th, Laird was 25th) in 1:40:08. An interesting movie about that Olympics has a three-and-a-half minute segment on the 20K is accessible on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVsQYRZgb10> (between 20:31 and 24:00). Four years later, Tom improved to 15th (Young was 10th, Klopfer 19th) in 1:34:58.8. An injury, however, in 1973, cost Tom not only the entire season but also his speed. At the 1976 Olympic Trials, Tom finished 8th. In 1980, Tom competed in one of the two race walk Olympic Trials but those races were kind of moot due to the U.S. Olympic boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.



U.S. 1968 Olympic Race Walk Team 50 Years Later - (from left) Dooley, Laird, Klopfer, Haluza and Young (only Dave Romansky could not make it)

In between his two Olympics, Tom won the silver medal (1:38:16) at the 1971 Pan Am Games in Cali, Colombia, a race won by his good friend Goetz Klopfer. The year prior to that may have been Tom's greatest performance year. Tom was 9th at the 1970 Lugano Cup 20K in 1:30:50, a performance that looms even larger when one considers the top six in that race: 1. Hans Georg Reimann (bronze at 1972 Olympic 20K; silver four years later); 2. Vladimir Golubnichiy (1960 and 1968 Olympic 20K Champion); 3. Peter Frenkel (1972 Olympic 20K Champion); 4. Nikolai Smaga (bronze at 1968 Olympic 20K); 5. Gennadiy Agapov (20K world record holder at the time); and 6. Gerhard Sperling (three-time 20K Olympian: 9th at Tokyo 1964, 5th at Mexico City 1968 and 4th at Munich 1972). Quite the line-up! A week later, a team of U.S. walkers won the prestigious Airolo-Chiasso 114K relay race in which Tom walked the longest leg (30K) in 2:20:43 on a high altitude course in the mountains.

Tom was U.S. National 20K Champion twice, in 1971 (1:32:18) and 1975 (1:35:52). His 1971 winning time stood as a meet record for six years. After his injury-plagued 1973 season, Tom gave the 50K a serious try. A year after his first foray at the distance in 1966, Tom had posted a 5:08:34.6 to finish 6th in a national race conducted in the summer heat of Chicago. Tom would improve at the longer distance once he concentrated on it in the seventies. Tom qualified for the 50K race at the 1977 Lugano Cup by finishing in 4:26:26, an improvement of some nine minutes from his previous best. In the Cup race, Tom came through half-way in 2:10:10 but would succumb to leg trouble after 35K. At the 1980 U.S. Olympic Trials, Tom was 7th in 4:26:15, an 11-second improvement of his personal best. His Olympic days behind him, Tom wanted to celebrate the end of his competitive days with a long distance flourish. The race he would have preferred, London-Brighton, the 52-plus miler classic, had bit the dust by then. Hence, in 1982, he chose to walk the 100 Miles on a track in San Diego, becoming U.S. Centurion No. C40, completing the distance in 22:30:31. What a way to crown a magnificent career. Then, Tom retired. Or so he thought ...

Tom never left walking. He kept himself fit and started teaching and coaching others. Starting in 1994, Tom became the national race walking coach for Team in Training (TNT), the fundraising program for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society in the United States. Volunteers train to complete marathons and half-marathons, whether running or walking, while raising funds from friends and loved ones to help fund blood cancer research, education and patient services. Tom coached TNT for the next 25 years. And towards the end of his tenure, he caught the competitive bug again. In 2015, Tom unretired and raced again for the first time since 1982, by competing in the 20K at the 2015 World Masters Athletics Championships in Lyon, France. Those competitions have become Tom's new favorite races, as he also took part in Perth 2016 and Malaga 2018. In Spain, Tom earned bronze in his age category (M70-74) in the 20K (2:10:02); winner Ian Richards had represented Britain at the 1980 Olympics in the 50K. Tom was looking forward to this year's Toronto world masters but that competition has fallen victim to the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, Tom is now preparing for Tampere 2021, if it takes place at all. But if it does, Tom will once again be accompanied by his trusty training partner Goetz Klopfer.



2016 World Masters Reunion in Perth of 1968 Olympians (from left) Christoph Höhne, Goetz Klopfer, Tom Dooley and Bob Gardiner



Tom Dooley Wins Bronze at 2018 WMA 20K

A look at Tom’s career demonstrates that race walking is a sport for all ages. Now 74, Tom prepares for a masters race the same way he prepared for the Olympics way back when. Tom may well have been one of the first to use the much heralded concept of “athlete branding,” when shortly after the 1968 Olympics, a friend recommended that he wear his Olympic team blazer to a job interview. Tom did and got his first teaching job. He’s been teaching students and walkers ever since.

Fitting for a history teacher (36 years of it), Tom’s sports career has put him at the crossroads of history in a front row seat. Tom having been roommates with Smith and Carlos was no coincidence. All three were students at San Jose State University, as was Lee Evans, the fourth roommate, who set a memorable world 400m record on his way to Olympic gold. The fifth roommate was Goetz, the only one of them not studying at San Jose State. One of the college professors at San Jose was Harry Edwards, who coordinated the athletes’ protest. Edwards became the most prominent sociologist advocating for the participation of Blacks in the management of professional sports. His work continues. The podium protest was not the only political aspect of the ’68 Games. Ten days before the start of the Games, hundreds of students had been shot and killed at a student protest. The event would later become known as the *Tlatelolco Massacre*. The Mexican Government suppressed news about the event and blamed the students for any deaths, reported to have been a much smaller number than the number of actual deaths. In 2000, the Mexican Government made public official documents that showed that government snipers had shot at government security forces, starting a firefight that cost the lives of some 300 to 400 people, a far cry from the 20 to 28 casualties reported by the Mexican Government back in

October of 1968, when they blamed armed provocateurs among the student protesters. The athletes knew little about the protest events.

Four years later, Tom was a witness to history once again, this time at the '72 Munich Games, when Palestinian terrorists killed a number of Israeli athletes during a hostage-taking that ended tragically at a Munich airport during a botched rescue attempt by West German security forces. Tom and his race walking team mates were on a day trip hosted by the German race walkers in celebration of the gold medal that had been won by Bernd Kannenberg in the 50K. When they returned, the Olympic Village was an armed camp under lockdown. It took a while for the walkers to be able to return to their compound, something they accomplished only with the assistance of their local interpreter who was on the bus. They watched the helicopters land that took the surviving hostages and their captors to the airport, without fully knowing what was going on. It was a “mind-numbing experience.” The day after the incident ended tragically, a memorial service was held in the Olympic Stadium. Tom described the mood as one of “shock, disbelief, very somber.”



Tom finishing a virtual 10K on 17 October 2020

Tom Dooley has witnessed history, been part of history and taught it. Fifty-five years after commencing his storied race walk career, 11 national records, 4 national titles and 2 Olympics later, he's still making history. I had the honor of timing Tom during a virtual 10K race that is part of the Pacific Association Grand Prix Series in the American West. At age 74, he posted a 1:02:45. Expect another terrific performance from him if Tampere 2021 takes place. Go Tom!

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Tim Erickson 20th October 2020