

Don Keane

1952	Olympic Games	Helsinki	10,000m	10 th 47.37
1956	Olympic Games	Melbourne	20 km	6 th 93.52

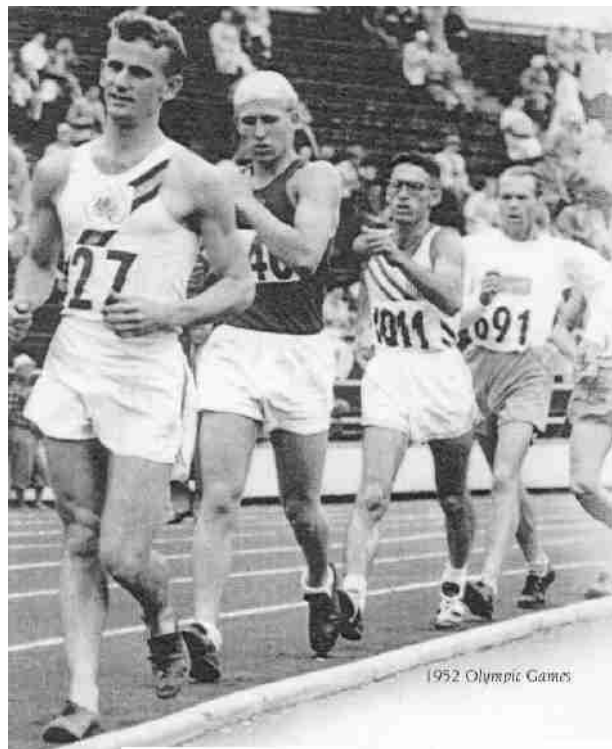
Don Keane was born on November 12, 1930, in Perth, W.A. His love of sport began in 1944 as a 13 year old at St Partick's in Geraldton. His first coach noted that he had a talent for middle distance running and encouraged him to pursue the sport. In 1947, he decided that walking was his preferred sport after watching the National Track and Field titles in Perth. He had no idea that racewalking had rules and he was disqualified in his first two starts.

Within a year, he was able to match it with the best walkers in the land. He opened the 1948 season with a half mile walk win in B grade in Perth. His time of **3:33** was 40 secs faster than the winning A grade time that day. At his next start, he was clocked over the mile at **7:32** – a State Junior record. Then he took the State Open record with **7:22.8**. Then a few days later, he set a new Australian Junior record of **6:49.2**, bettering Queenslander Tom Daintry's record by 12.3 secs.

He was a great all round athlete as a junior, not only winning the walks but regularly featuring in the sprints, middle distance, field events and hurdles. He also won the State Junior 5 miles cross-country title. It is fair to say that if he had chosen another athletic discipline other than racewalking, he would probably have made it to the top anyway.

He lived in West Perth, about 2 km from the city. He would regularly race the local trams into town and out again, up the hill. This flat out running was combined with intensive body strength work – parallel bars, chinups, press ups, etc. What his training lacked in quantity, he more than made up in intensity.

In his first year as a senior, he astounded all by winning the 1950 Australian Track Championship in Adelaide, beating Athol Stubbs by 6 inches. Stubbs had won 3 of the last 4 Australian Track Championships and was considered unbeatable at this stage. Don's time of **13:43** was a new Australian record.



Taken in the early stages of the first heat in the 1952 Olympic 10,000m track walk, the photo shows Don (number 27) in front of Bruno Junk (USSR), Henry Lasko (USA), John Michaelson (SWE) and Chevalier (FRA).

He went on to win another six titles over that distance (1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1957 and 1958). He and Ross Haywood share the record of 7 national track championship victories.

With his Australian championship wins in 1950-1952, he was without a doubt the top track walker but he surprised many by beating favourite Ted Allsopp in the 10,000m Olympic trial, held in Melbourne on 2 February 1952 (**46:11.6**). This won him selection for the 1952 Games in Helsinki and, at only 21 years of age, he competed in the first heat of the Olympic 10,000m track walk. He led the field through the 5000m mark in 22:26 before settling back and finishing 5th (**46:55**) to ensure his place in the final. There he recorded a fine 10th (**47:37**).

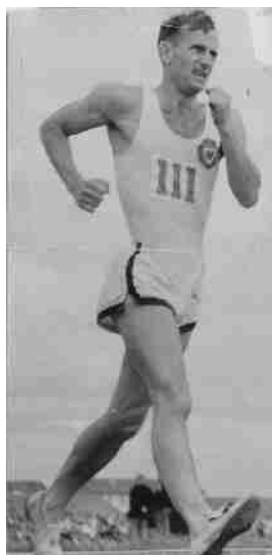
Although he continued to race from his Western Australian base over the next few years, he realised that if he wished to pursue walking excellence, he needed to move to Victoria, the current walking powerhouse. In early 1956, he bit the bullet, packed his bags, made the long journey to Melbourne and joined Glenhuntly Athletics Club. Although having no formal coach, he was always ready to listen to what others had to offer and gleaned his training ideas from the likes of Percy Cerutti, George Knott, Gus Theobald and Frank McGuire. It was Percy who started him on weight work that he then started to mix with his callisthenics and exercises each day.

Weighing 147 lbs and standing 5 ft 9 ins in height, he was a real powerhouse who combined sheer speed with a near perfect style.

With the Olympics scheduled in Melbourne in November 1956, his training took on a new intensity. He set a new Australian record in winning the 1956 Victorian 2 mile title in **13:28.8**, defeating Ted Allsopp. But then he was disqualified in the National 2 mile title the next month in Melbourne in front of a crowd of 22,000. It was the same day on which John Landy stopped to pick up a fallen runner and then surged back to win the 1 mile championship. Getting the red flag at the 1 mile mark, Don refused to leave the track and finished about 100 metres ahead of Ted in a time of around 13:15. It was a time of acrimony that Don would rather forget nowadays. He threw in his walking and turned his attention to the 10 km run as his Olympic alternative. He was working at the time as a milkie, running behind the milk cart, and was in great shape for both walking and running.

He eventually calmed down and returned to his chosen sport and was quickly back to his best. That year, he and Ted Allsopp had many battles. In the Victorian 10 mile title Ted held him out with a winning time of 72:44 to Don's second place time of **73:09**. But then Don bounced back and won the Glover Shield 10,000m title in Sydney in **47:03**.

A second Olympic selection was confirmed and this time it was as a member of the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club. Don was training with Ray Smith and New Zealander Norm Read and racing against Ted. All had been selected for the Olympics and fed off each other in a competitive atmosphere in which Don thrived. His program included intense track sessions at Olympic Park. There he regularly rolled off repetitions of 5 x 4km or 10 x 2 km with minimal rest between each rep.



Racing at the Olympic Village Track in West Heidelberg

This photo was taken at the Olympic Village Track in West Heidelberg just before the 1956 Olympics and appeared in the Melbourne Sun Herald. It shows a good double support phase and the high arms indicate that he was probably just starting to wind up for the finishing sprint. His time on that occasion was 13:30 for the 2 miles (about 12:30 for the 3000m).

On September 22, 1956, a special 2 Hour Track World Record attempt was set up for Ted Allsopp at Olympic Park in Melbourne. When Don heard about it, he realised it was also an opportunity for him and he approached Alf Robinson to see if he could attack the records for the 1 hour, 15 km and 10 mile distances. Alf had the daunting task of organising the dozens of watches and officials. First there had to be 3 running watches to time the overall event. Then there had to

be one individual watch for each record. It was also necessary to have a second watch for each record in case the first walker to break the record failed to finish and the second walker was then to be credited with the record. In those days, you had to finish the race to claim the record.



This famous cartoon, published in 1956, shows Don leading the field in typical fashion.

A 10AM start had to be postponed by an hour when it was found that the ground had not been booked - it was necessary to ring councillors to get the ground opened! Soon after the delayed start, conditions deteriorated drastically with gale force winds and hail storms lasting for some 30 minutes. It is a credit to all concerned that the event went on and the records started to fall. By the time the event had finished, over 30 records had fallen in what remains the greatest walking event ever staged in Australia.

Don went to the front immediately with a 1:40 first lap and was unstoppable even in the dreadful conditions. He passed the 5 mile mark in **35:03.4** for a new Australian and Victorian record. Maintaining his pace, he set new British Empire, Australian and Victorian records for 10 km (**43:38.2**), 7 miles (**49:14.2**), 1 hour (**8 miles 847 yards**), 15 km (**1:06:09.4**) and 10 miles (**1:11:07.8**). At the 10 mile mark, he stopped to change his singlet in what was a major miscalculation. Getting going again after some 50 seconds, he raced on towards the 20 km mark, reaching it in **1:30:22.2** for a yet another set of records. His 20 km time was only 10.2 secs outside the current world record but he had dropped 50 secs at the 10 mile mark! He had missed a certain world record.

Without doubt, if the event had started at the correct time of 10AM, Don would have broken the world records for 15 km, 10 mile and 20 km. As it was, he missed all three by a matter of seconds. It was a satisfying yet disappointing day for him. And now he had to keep on the track and finish the 2 Hour event to claim his records. While he struggled through the remainder of the race, Percy Cerutti was there shouting "*Come on Keane, you lazy bastard, you won't die*".

The rest of the race belonged to Ted Allsopp who had passed the 20 km mark about 90 secs behind Don. Ted powered on to set new World, Empire, Australian and Victorian records for 25 km and 2 hours. And to top off a wonderful race, a young Noel Freeman set new Australian and Victorian Junior records for 5 miles, 10 km, 7 miles, 1 hour, 15 km, 10 miles, 20 km, 25 km and 2 hours.

Don followed up this wonderful performance with new Australian records over 3000m (**12:22.6**) on October 6 and 5000m (**21:07.8**) on October 13, both at Olympic Park in Melbourne in the warmup meets before the Olympics.

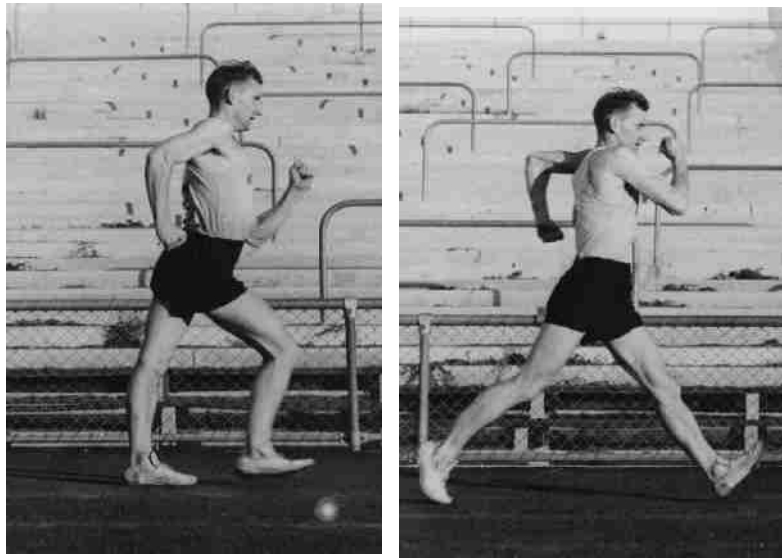
It was no surprise to anyone when, in front of a home crowd at the Melbourne Olympics, he finished a wonderful sixth in the 1956 Olympic 20 km walk in **1:33:52**. It ended a tremendous year of racing for Don.

Only 3 months after the Olympics, a less than 100 percent fit Don won the 1957 National 2 Mile Track walk in the moderate time of **13:57**. There seemed no stopping him.

But the old adage of Australians and tall poppies was well and truly illustrated— cynics trotted out the old insinuation that he was consistently off the ground in his races. In an effort to prove them wrong, he invited anyone to bring their camera to Olympic Park in Melbourne one night and he staged a series of ten flat out 100 m walk throughs with 30 seconds recovery between each. He averaged 17 seconds for each 100 m sprint and not one of the various shots could capture him off the ground. His stride was measured at a massive 1.25m.

He was also able to hold his speed well and had a best 400m laptime of 1:15. In an era of tough judging, he was rarely disqualified in the sprint home and his speed endurance and technique normally held off all challenges in the home

straight. His theory was that the faster he walked, the greater the contact because of the greater thrust and pressure he was able to bring to bear with his technique.



Some photos from the famous 1957 photo opportunity – catch me off the ground if you can!

Don won the 1958 National track title (his seventh) and continued to race on, although work pressures made it harder for him to prepare and maintain his form. He retired from competition in 1960 after his bid for one final Olympic berth had failed. A young Noel Freeman had set a new standard and the selectors went with a policy of youth. It was the end of the road for Don after a career spanning 14 years. In June 1961, he returned to Perth where he still lives now.

He made a brief comeback in 1966 with the lure of a Commonwealth Games 20 mile walk on offer. He came third in the National 3000m track title but was never a serious contender over the long road distance.

Don went on to become an IAAF judge and was at one time the Western Australian Walks Coordinator. In later life he developed an interest in throwing events because his son David showed promise in that area. He began coaching discus and shotput in 1988 and, for the last 10 years, has coached the field events at St Hilda's in Perth. At 73 years of age, he shows no signs of slowing down and still takes a fatherly interest in Western Australian racewalking.

He and Ted Allsopp were the 2 most consistently outstanding walkers of the 1950's and their many battles are worthy of a separate chapter. By 1959, they held between them every Australian walking record from 2 miles to 50 km. Don's competitive record and his two top ten finishers at the Olympics ensure his place at the top of the pantheon of Australian walkers.