

Ernie Austen, 1924 Olympic Walker, SBW Member.

NSW athlete Ernie (Ernest E.) Austen took up the sport of racewalking around 1910 but was not immediately successful. With the Great War interrupting the careers of all young athletes, it was not until the re-establishment of organized sport in 1919 that he finally rose to prominence with a series of fine record breaking performances. Lightly built and with what was regarded as a perfect style, his mixture of speed, style and stamina marked him out in any field.

But as often happens, when a walker of note rises to the fore, another follows soon after. Thus it was with Austen for, as he rose to the top, a young giant called George Parker, some 10 years his junior, followed close behind and soon overtook him. Austen had to wait a number of years for his second opportunity at fame. Let the story unfold.

At the 1919 Metropolitan Championships at the Sydney Sports Grounds, Austen won both the 1 mile and the 3 mile walk events (with Parker second in both). Then at the St. Patrick's Day Carnival in Sydney in March 1920, Austen and Parker had a repeat battle over the 1 Mile distance with the older Austen winning in the fine time of 6:42. Victorian walker Ted Drayton thought that this performance put Austen some 40 yards better than anyone else in Australia over this distance.

Austen followed this up with a win in the NSW 7 Mile Walk championship, establishing new records for the four, six and seven mile distances. Two months later, he won the NSW One Hour Championship, breaking his own records for five, six and seven miles and establishing new ones for five miles and one hour.



1Ernie Austen displays perfect walking style, Sydney, 1922

Both Austen and Parker were selected as NSW representatives to compete in the 1920 Australian Amateur championships with Austen expected to dominate proceedings. However, Parker proved the surprise of the championships with wins in both walks. On the opening day, he won the 3 mile event in 22:45.4 and, on the final day, he demonstrated his marked superiority by winning the 1 mile in 6:49, his nearest opponent being 60 yards away.

Then taking part in a meeting at Pratten Park (Ashfield) a few nights after the Australasian championships, Parker won a mile handicap from scratch in 6:33 which beat the NSW record. In was unfortunate for him that the required 3 stopwatches were not present. These performances gained Parker Olympic selection for the Antwerp 1920 Games (where he secured the silver medal in the 3000m Walk). For Austen it must have been a great disappointment – what had seemed a certain Olympic berth was snatched from under him by his young challenger.

After the Olympics, Parker seemingly retired and Austen, with a succession of wins over various distances in the NSW championships of 1921 – 1923, was once again to the forefront of Australian walking. With interest in walking becoming stronger, the Victorian and New South Wales walking clubs decided that an interstate road race should be held. After 2 years of discussions, the date and distance and status were finally decided. In July 1923, the first Australasian 7 Mile Championship was held in Melbourne (this event became a bi-annual Championship with teams competing for the Glover Shield). Austen led from the gun and won easily in the fine time of 55:44.4 over what was described as a heavy wet track.

In 1924, Austen's great form continued. In February he easily won the Australian Track championship walks in Hobart – the One Mile in 6:45 and the Three Mile in 22:33. A correspondent commented that "*his wins reminded one of W.Murray in his prime*". Then in



March, he won the NSW track walks in similar style. He was now the unchallenged champion on both road and track.

Finally the veteran walker's efforts were rewarded with Olympic selection and Austen, now in his thirties, proudly made the trip to Paris for the 10,000m track walk. Amazingly and controversially, he was warned in the first lap by the French judge who thought his gait doubtful. In the second lap the American judge ordered him off when he was lying third and was doing well. In later years, he commented

"I was in third place, just behind the leaders and going along very easily. I thought I had a good chance but then an American judge came up and told me I was disqualified. I asked him why but he said he didn't know. You usually get two cautions before being disqualified but I wasn't aware of them. Nobody ever did tell me why I was outed."

He broke down and went to the dressing rooms. It was his first disqualification in some 15 years of competitive walking. The pace at the time of his disqualification was very slow – equal to about 7:30 to the mile. In fact, of the 13 starters, only 6 finished in what was a farcical event. Australian officials were adamant that his style was satisfactory and the whole event deteriorated into an ugly affair. (Walking was consequently dropped from the 1928 Olympics and did not re-appear in the Olympics until 1932, when a 50 km roadwalk was introduced.)



Ernie Austin, in the middle, before being disqualified in the 1924 Olympic 10,000m walk

Returning home, he announced his retirement from the sport and was not seen for some years. While George Parker, in a return to the sport, rampaged and took all before him,

Austen was nowhere to be seen. It was not until 1927, when Parker's star was fading, that Austen once again faced the starter's gun. He was soon back to his best with a win in the

1927 Australasian 1 Mile walk in 6:52 and a second to New Zealand champion W. Lankey in the Australasian 3 Mile walk.

The 1928 NSW Track titles saw Austen win both the 1 Mile walk (6:48.8) and the 3 Mile walk (22:53.8). The

commentary read as follows

Parker finds it increasingly difficult to reduce weight and he looked decidedly on the big side, whilst Austen

appeared well attuned for the fray.

Austen continued, like Parker, to race on the local Sydney scene for a further few years but his days at the top were

over. He finally retired in 1932, after more than 20 years of competitive walking. Still an active sportsman, he took up golf with immediate success.

"I won my first trophy at Kyogle, up north, and the next week I won it again. They thought I was a horrible burglar, coming up for their trophies. The prize was a man's Stetson hat but I didn't wear hats so I gave it back and they thought I was a good bloke again."

Despite representing Australia at Olympic level and holding various Australasian walk titles and record times, he regarded his proudest achievement as in the field of golf when, at 81 years of age, he played a round in less than his age, 80 off the stick. (Interestingly, 1912 Olympic walker Bill Murray was also able to lay claim to this feat, achieved by very few golfers).

Like A. O. Barrett in Victoria, Ernie was also a prominent bush walker and is mentioned on more than one occasion in the book *Jock Marshall: One Armed Warrior*, the story of the extraordinary Australian scientist and naturalist.

Ernie Austen's place in Australian racewalking history is assured. As one of our first Olympic walkers, he paved the way for future generations to try their mettle against the top echelon of international walkers. He, along with Bill Murray and George Parker, showed that Australian walkers were able to mix it with the best in the world. Since then, Australia has gone on to have a proud history of Olympic racewalking participation. Ernie Austen died in 1985 in his mid nineties.

By Tim Erickson, Secretary, Victorian Race Walking Club

<http://members.trump.net.au/austen/ernie.htm>

Registration Number	Last Name	Given Name(s)	Father's Given Name(s)	Mother's Given Name(s)	District	Event	Year
37063/1891	AUSTEN	ERNEST	CHARLES W	CATHERINE H	WATERLOO	B	1891
Paris Olympics	AUSTEN	ERNEST	Athletics		10,000m walk	Disqualified	Round 1 1924

<http://members.trump.net.au/austen/ernie.htm>

<http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/athletes/au/ernie-austen-1.html>

<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/70816191/Austen---Ernie---ERNIE-AUSTEN -1924-OLYMPIC-WALKER>