

## TEBBS LLOYD JOHNSON

Tebbs Lloyd Johnson was born at Melton Mowbray, Leicestershire on 7<sup>th</sup> April 1900. He was quite a useful boxer in his army days, 1918-20. With proper training, he thought he could have done quite well as a high jumper.

On Good Friday, 1921, at Birmingham in a 2 mile handicap, he began a race walking career that was to cover 40 years and one which must rank as one of the longest and most successful in the history of race walking in England. During this period he won 6 National titles, was placed on 15 occasions and competed in two Olympic Games.

Whilst a member of Leicester Harriers he took bronze in the RWA 20 Mile championships in 1923 and 1924 and won silver in 1925. He also showed good versatility in taking bronze in the AAU 3 Mile track championship in 1926.

As the Harriers had only a walking membership of two or three, he joined Surrey A. C. around 1926. In their ranks he won the 1927 National 20 Mile event (**2:55:53**) and led their team to their first and only victory in a National Championship.

The club expressed their thanks by making Lloyd a life member. In 1927 the "Leicester Mercury" walk started and Leicester W.C. was formed. Thus he was able to join a club nearer home. He then walked with that club for the duration of his long and illustrious career.

Controversies in the 1924 Olympic Games had spelt an end to Olympic track walking and indeed nearly spelt the end of walking. Fortunately, there followed a change in walking fashion with road walking overtaking track walking in popularity and British officials worked together and bid for a long distance road event to be introduced into the Olympics. It was accepted and the first Olympic road walk, over 50 kilometres, was announced for the Los Angeles Games in 1932.

Lloyd Johnson was keen to represent Britain and moved up a notch in his training. After finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 1928 and 1930 National 20's, he became the first "double" National champion in 1931 with wins in both the National 20 Mile championship (**2:52:41**) and the RWA 50 km Championship (**4:55:48**) and placed second to the Italian champion Pretti in the 1932 RWA 50 km (**4:43:34**). But Tommy Green, Britain's leading walker and holder of the world best road time for the 50 km, was the only British walker selected for the Games. Lloyd Johnson was close to selection but not close enough.

From 1932 onwards, he was a regular medallist in both the RWA 20 Mile and the RWA 50 km championships. Perhaps his finest performance of this period was his 1934 50 km win when he recorded **4:36:30**, one of the best times in the world at that time. It was no surprise when he was selected for the 1936 Olympic 50 km walk, along with Harold Whitlock. But the Berlin experience was not a good one for Lloyd Johnson. Following a severe attack of sea sickness on the journey to Berlin, he did not recover in time and, while Whitlock took all before him with gold, he was well back in 17<sup>th</sup> place in **4:54:56**.

He announced his retirement in 1937 but found judging a poor substitute for the real thing so he took to the road again. During the war years, he managed to regain his fitness with the result that he took third place in the 1946 National 20 Mile and enabled Leicester to win their first outright race.



Tebbs Lloyd Johnson crosses the line to take third in the 1948 Olympic 50 km

In a monumental race in the 1948 RWA 50 km (which was also the official Olympic trial), he took second with a PB time of **4:36:02**, only 29 seconds behind Rex Whitlock (Harold's younger brother). Thus he gained his second Olympic berth, at 48 years of age!

This time, it all came together. The Olympic 50 km race was held over a gruelling course at Wembley in hot conditions. As expected, the Swedish champion Ljunggren led from start and had built his lead to 40 seconds by the 5 km mark. At the half way mark, passed in 2:12:17, he had increased the lead to 5 minutes with Whitlock in second and Martineau of Great Britain in third. Whitlock was forced to retire at 35 km and Martineau began to lose further ground. Ljunggren, walking smoothly, entered the stadium nearly a mile in front to win gold. Behind him Lloyd made a superlative effort to move up into second place, only to give way to Gaston in the closing stages. **With his third place, he became the oldest person ever to win an Olympic track and field medal.**

1.	John LJUNGGREN	SWE	4:41:52
2.	Gaston GODEL	SWI	4:48:17
3.	<b>T. LLOYD JOHNSON</b>	<b>GBR</b>	<b>4:48:31</b>
4.	Edgar BRUUN	NOR	4:53:18
5.	Harold MARTINEAU	GBR	4:53:58
6.	Rune BJURSTROM	SWE	4:56:43
7.	Pierre MAZILLE	FRA	5:01:40
8.	Claude HUBERT	FRA	5:03:12

Lloyd continued to walk for many years after his 1948 Olympic medal performance. The following news snippet from 1959 shows his great longevity

#### **Astonishing win by Lloyd Johnson**

*That a 59 year-old could beat the field in the Highgate Club's Luton to London 31¼ miles seems impossible, but on a day when the heat added several minutes to expected times, the old Leicester warrior, T. Lloyd Johnson, walked through into the lead to pass Freddy Brooks at halfway and to increase his advantage steadily to over six minutes at the finish, reached in 5:11:15.*



One of the races that he made his own was the Leicester Mercury 20 Mile road walk. He won the inaugural edition in 1927 and, in fact, appeared in every one of the first 18 editions (1927-1937, 1947-1949) for an amazing 9 wins. Even more amazingly, he was never outside the first 3 in all 18 appearances. The following photo shows the start of the 1958 edition of this event and who else would be waving the start flag but Lloyd Johnson. This particular edition of the race featured the cream of English walkers, including International Representatives Tom Misson, George Coleman, Don Thompson, Albert Johnson, Lol Allan, George Chaplin and John Edgington. It also featured George Hall who was at that time the world's youngest Centurion (he completed his 100 miler at age 17).



His performances in the AAU 20 Mile and 50 km championships were just as good - he medalled 13 times in the 20 Mile championship (including golds in 1927, 1931 and 1934) and medalled in the RWA 50 km championship 8 times (including golds in 1931, 1934 and 1949).

It was fitting that his farewell walk was in the 1970 edition of the Leicester Mercury 20 Mile road walk at the age of 70.

He rated his top 3 performances as follows <sup>1</sup>

- Taking 2<sup>nd</sup> place to Rex Whitlock at the National 50 kilos in 1948 at the age of 48
- Winning the 50 kilos at Croydon in 1934 when he made up a deficit of over 3 minutes in the last three miles to overhaul Harold Whitlock and Fred Rickards and
- Never having been unplaced in 18 successive "Leicester Mercury races which included 9 wins.

He applied a general formula to training – a little bit over the distance at a relaxed pace with a little bit under the distance fast on alternate weekends and mid-week 5 or 7 miles flat out. He never did exceed two stripped training spins a week but he put his back into it and included a lot of all out sprints between telegraph poles as there was no track available in Leicester. Deep breathing and muscle loosening exercises he found to be very beneficial. In his early days, he got a few hints from the great George Larnier and he said that he owed a lot to the training methods of Bert Dunmore, trainer to Woolwich Arsenal, whom he described as a wonderful man and a great personality.

His thinking was modern, even as an old man, as can be seen from the following letter, dated 10<sup>th</sup> September 1983, that was published in the November 1983 edition of Race Walking Record

*Dear John*

*Several letters deplore the performances of our 50 km walkers. Until the mid-1960's we held our own with the world at this distance: Tommy Green, Harold Whitlock, Norman Read (although walking for New Zealand), Don Thompson, Paul Nihill, and not forgetting my humble self. But we don't seem to have improved so much as the rest of the world.*

<sup>1</sup> Race Walking Record No 253, September 1963

*I always knew that 50 km times would be slashed because we never really started racing until the last ten miles or so. I don't think we were ever really fit enough for all the way effort. Personally I never trained more than twice a week in my life. I didn't have the time and this went for most of my contemporaries.*

*Fifty kms is a very exciting race and must need a great deal of preparation. One of my old rivals, the Rev David Christie-Murray once had a plan. If he walked seven miles at his racing speed for that distance and immediately forgot that he had done it and started another seven miles, he could do that in the same time, then rub that one from his mind and do another six at the same pace, it would be a pretty good twenty. It didn't work because he hadn't trained his body to keep up with this "mind over matter" theory.*

*Still, I think that something like this attitude must be adopted. We have walkers who can do 73-75 minutes for 10 miles quite comfortably and fairly. They must train and train until they can do this twice, then train and train again until it can be done three times.*

*But until we have full time paid coaches and walkers who can be free to spend the time and the means not to have to worry about such mundane things as earning a living, it won't happen. We have other athletes in other spheres who seem to enjoy these facilities, so why not walkers? Having said this, I still regret the need for this sort of mentality. Sports should be fun, not a chore.*

*Yours sincerely*

*T. Lloyd Johnson*

He is one of the giants of British walking and is proof that you are never too old to strive for your dreams. Until this day, he remains the oldest person ever to win an Olympic Track and Field medal.