

Ray Smith

1956

1956	Olympic Games	Melbourne	50 km	6 th	4:56:08
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Born on August 12 1929, Ray competed as a junior with Coburg Harriers and joined VAWC in 1947. He quickly broke through into the top senior ranks with the silver medal at the 1949 Australian 2 mile track title (**14:44**) at only 20 years of age. From then on, he was a regular placegetter in the major championships, showing talent over all distances. He was strongly built at 6 ft 2 in and 189 lbs.

He joined the famous Cerutti group at Portsea in 1953 and was advised by him for the remainder of his career. He was not the only walker in this elite group – Don Keane, who had represented Australia in the 1952 Olympics, was also a regular at Percys' beach property. Together, they trained alongside the top runners of the day – men like Dave Power, John Landy and Herb Elliot. Percy's unique motivational coaching produced a succession of champions. It was an environment that predated the modern Institute of Sport but was just as successful in nurturing talent and inspiring athletes to aim for the top.

Percy had no time for slackers – only full commitment was acceptable. But Ray and Don were up to the task. The following letter, written by Percy to his wife, sums up Portsea well. Imagine the group of elite walkers and runners, satisfyingly exhausted from work on the property and training, relaxing with Percy at the end of another hard day.

Darling,

We have had a good meal washed down by, of all things, champagne! (produced by Don Keane). Now we are all gathered around, listening to a beautiful long-playing record of Ray Smith's - Wagner and Sibelius. Some boys sit in the semi-dark in the armchairs listening, Don Keane reclines full length, eyes closed. Ray sits at the table with me, and I, of course, write. We are listening to the overture of Tannhauser, with all its runs and variations.

This is the ideal life. Hard exercise, work, good food, good wine, rest and music. It is a moment of perfection for men, when they feel as men should.

So here we sit. I, for one, perfectly content: never happier: never been more certain of myself and the future - but being what I am, my thoughts turn to you, and so I write. Men feel like this in Olympic Villages - in Arctic camps - on the slopes of Everest - even up on Bogong or in the huts of Hotham. There are some places where women are intruders - but in the end the men will yearn to be back with their women - and so return, we hope, as conquering heroes.

*Indeed there can be a terrific sense of destiny and the dramatic where there is music and quiet. It is out of such states that the seeds of greatness generate - and the effect on these boys can be incalculable. I feel the powers in me. I feel I could run a 4 minute mile myself. God bless my soul, I believe Ray could walk one.*¹

In 1954 Ray decided to train for the 1956 Olympic 50 km event and started what was for him his most important walking period. This culminated with his top walking performances in the 1955-56 timeframe.



Ray leads a track walk at Olympic Park in early 1956

His first outing over the 50 km distance was on 27 August 1955 in a VAWC 50k club championship race over the Olympic course. According to his training diary, he retired at the 21 mile mark with leg problems.

Five weeks later he fronted for the 1955 Victorian 50 km championship on 1 October. He led all the way on the tough out-and-back Showgrounds/Rockbank course only to be caught and passed by Jim Short as he left Ballarat Road to go down the hill and on to the showgrounds. The loss spurred him on.

He had finished his first 50 km event and this, combined with his top position in the Australian ranking over the 20 km distance (**1:39:24**) gave him a lot of confidence as he headed towards the Olympic trial.

¹ *Why Die? The Extraordinary Percy Cerrutty* by Gream Sims, Lothian Books, South Melbourne, 2003, p194

His next outing over the 50 km distance was the 1956 Australian 50 km title race and Olympic trial. This event was held on the Olympic Games course on Sunday 9 September 1956, starting and finishing at Olympic Park rather than the MCG. Walking a wonderful race, he finished 2nd to New Zealander Norm Read (who went on to win the 1956 Olympic 50 km race). Ray's time of **4:40:24** broke the Australian record and won him the Australian Title. It also gained him selection, along with Ron Crawford and Ted Allsopp, in the 50 km for the 1956 Olympic Games.

His success was never contemplated by the Officials Selection Committee. Most athletes in those days officiated whenever possible and he had been named as an official well before the trial. In fact, he had already collected all the officials uniform in preparation for his role as an official.

His fourth and final 50 km race was the Olympic event in November 1956. His racing strategy tells the story. He led through the 5 km mark with Abdom Pamich and held on with the lead group until the 10 km mark. Then he faded in the hot conditions, passing the half way mark in 10th place. On the long return trip home, his Portsea training saw him come to the fore and he passed a number of flagging walkers to finish sixth (**4:56:08**). It was a finely judged race in hot conditions.



A fine study of Ray towards the end of the 1956 Olympic 50 km walk

Possessed of an impeccable style and impressive speed, he had a best time of **6:35** for the 1 mile walk. His 8 year career up till 1956 saw him win Victorian,

NSW and Australian titles over a variety of distances ranging from 2 Miles to 50 km. The main highlights were as follows

1948 Victorian Championship 10 mile Walk	Silver
1949 Australian Championship 2 mile Walk	Silver
1949 Victorian Championship 2 mile Walk	Bronze
1950 Victorian Championship 10k Walk	Gold
1950 Australian Championship 10k Teams Walk	Silver
1950 Victorian Championship 2 mile Walk	Gold
1951 Victorian Championship 10 mile Walk	Silver
1951 Australian Championship 2 mile Walk	Bronze
1952 Victorian Championship 2 mile Walk	Silver
1952 New South Wales Championship 2 mile Walk	Gold
1955 Victorian Championship 50k Walk	Silver
1956 Australian Championship 50k Teams Walk	Silver
1956 Australian Championship 50k Walk	Gold
1956 Australian Championship 2 mile Walk	Bronze
1956 Olympic Games - Melbourne 50k Walk	Sixth

Shortly after the 1956 Olympics, Ray incurred a complicated knee injury whilst cross training. He battled on for 18 months before undergoing surgery. Residual effects put to an end any possibility of making it to the 1960 Olympics in Rome.

But like many of the champion walkers of past eras, he continued to compete at club level for many years and was a role model for the younger walkers as they progressed through the ranks. His last serious long walk was in the 1969 at the annual Australian Federation of Race Walking 20 Mile Championship in Canberra. Although just about to turn 40, he still came 6th in a good time of 3:10:08 and left many of the younger walkers in his wake. At the finish, he was heard to remark to two fellow Victorians:

“You young blokes might be able to walk faster than me but you can’t walk any b... harder”.

Ray battled on until 1972 when the inaugural World Veterans Track and Field Meet was to be held in Cologne in Germany. There he competed in the 10 km racewalk and came 10th in a time of 56:45. This meet was the forerunner to World Veterans Championships.

This was the last time he competed and he classifies that as his retirement date.

Once he hung up his walking shoes, he threw himself into the sport as an official, administrator and judge. This culminated in his appointment as an IAAF judge. In this capacity, he officiated at many international meetings in the 1980s and the 1990s

His list of non-competitive achievements in the sport is perhaps even more impressive than his competitive record and shows just how much he has contributed on so many levels.

Life Member - Athletics Victoria
Life Member, Past President - Victorian Race Walking Club
Life Member - Coburg Harriers Club
Former Member - IAAF Walking Committee
IAAF Walk Judge 1977 - 1995
Former Member - Athletics Australia Walking Committee
Past Vice President - Australian Federation of Race Walking Clubs
Former Member - VLAA Walk Standards Panel
Former Member - Athletics Victoria Officials Committee
Manager - Victorian Walking Teams
Convenor - VAAA Race Walking Selectors
Founding Member Steering Committee for - Victorian Veterans Athletic Club
Officiated as walk judge in all states of Australia, ACT and Northern Territory.
Officiated as walk judge in the following countries - Australia, China, England, Germany, Isle of Man, Italy, Korea, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, USA and former USSR.

During his 19 years as an IAAF judge, he judged nearly every year at international competitions and can lay claim to be Australia's most experienced judge.

Ray is still as active as ever in the Victorian Race Walking Club where he judges regularly, produces the weekly newsletter and was until only recently the communications officer. His vast knowledge of the sport and his willingness to 'put in' continues to make him a highly valued member of the committee and the club.

When asked recently to summarise his Olympic achievement, he commented as follows:

"Percy Cerruty turned me into a well trained plodder who found 15 minutes of fame in the longest event on the track and field program."