

Improving performance in the 50 kilometres walk

Julian Hopkins

“*Julian Hopkins, former British national coach for the walking events, here upholds the importance of specializing in the 50 km event. He then discusses the fundamental elements of a race walker's training: general endurance, specific endurance and speed. Specific endurance is, in his view, the key element for success.*”

Introduction

In recent years, considerable concern has been expressed about indifferent performance on the international level in the 50 km walk. Although there has been plenty of criticism, I have heard few constructive ideas for improving standards. In this article I would like to offer a few suggestions of my own.

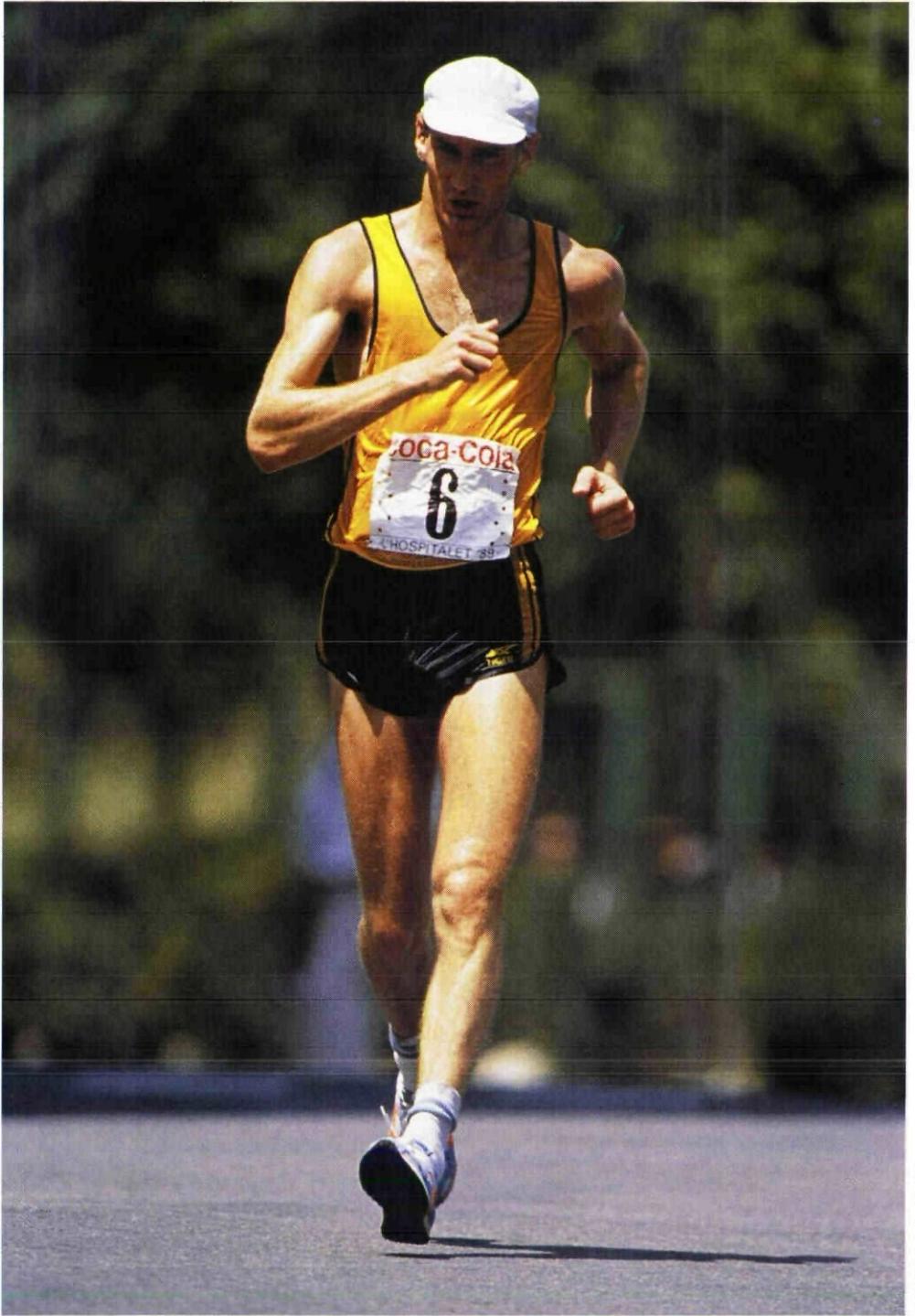
Frequency of racing at 50 km

Firstly, I do not think that walkers race 50 km frequently enough. Many of them will probably have raced several times at 30 km but this is a very different event from the 50 km.

The most successful walkers in recent years raced over 50 km three or four times per season. If a walker is correctly conditioned for the event, I think that three races per season should be about right, otherwise I cannot see how he can gain the necessary experience to excel at the event until he is too old to benefit! This applies both to psychological and physical conditioning.

The need to specialize

My second point is the closely related matter of specialization. If a walker is content to race 20 km one week, 3 km the next, then 50 km, another 20 km and so on - then he must accept that he is unlikely to reach his potential at any distance. If a walker is aiming for international honours, then he must decide whether he is a 20 km



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or a 50 km walker and then train and race accordingly.

It seems to me that many potential international walkers fall between two stools because they race in a haphazard way, trying to make the team at one distance first and then the other all in the same season. In fact, it is difficult to get many top young walkers to commit themselves to 50 km, even when they clearly lack the basic speed for the shorter event.

Basic principles of training

This leads me to the matter of training for the 50 km event. Whilst admitting that there will always be many individual variations, it seems to me that fundamental principles are being overlooked by some walkers. In recent years, we have had a number of walkers who have done around 2h35m for 20 miles and yet have struggled to break 4h30m for 50 km. As this represents a slowing of about one minute per mile, I believe this indicates that there is something wrong with their preparation.

There seems to be a school of thought which considers 20 mile training to be sufficient for 50 km. We hear that 50 km is only another 11 miles - but this represents a 55% increase in distance! What we need to do is to take a logical look at the training which is required. This can be done by dividing training into three types of walking: slower than racing speed (general endurance); walking at racing speed (specific endurance); and walking faster than racing speed (speed).

General endurance training

Most walkers include plenty of general endurance work, but I feel they do not include frequent sessions of more than three hours. I believe it is essential for a 50 km walker to walk for 4 to 5 hours once each week so that eventually the distance itself is no longer a problem either physically, or mentally; but this type of training is only the base for faster training - i.e. walking at racing speed for long periods.

Specific endurance training

This type of training is, to my mind, the key to success at all distances, but is quite often neglected. It is logical for a man planning to walk 50 km in 4h20m to cover many kilometres in training at that speed - i.e. 5 minutes per kilometre. Sessions like 25 km in 2h5m or 30 km in 2h30m should be frequently attempted. After all, he will have to hold his speed for over 4 hours in the race itself.

One very important offshoot of this type of training is pace judgement. In a long race, it is essential to adopt an even pace schedule and to start at that speed. Many walkers make the mistake of walking too quickly early on (because they feel good!) and subsequently suffer a large drop in speed in the last third of the race. A walker aiming for 4h35m should reach 10 km in as near to 55 minutes as possible - 53 or 54 minutes will certainly be too fast whilst 52 minutes would prove disastrous. A small error early on is magnified later by the distance of the race.

I think it is preferable to do plenty of this type of training rather than of speed training.

Speed training

Whilst not denying that it is important for a 50 km walker to maintain, or even improve, his basic speed, I think it is detrimental to do a lot of walking at speeds much higher than race speed. Such training is exhausting and prevents as much of the vital specific endurance training being carried out. A potential 4h10m performer needs to walk at 5 minutes per kilometre during the race, so speed training at 4m30s per kilometre should be quite fast enough.

Of course, short distance races are a good form of speed training, but it is important not to do too many of them for two reasons. Firstly, the body will get used to a rhythm which is too quick for 50 km training. Secondly, the weekend is virtually the only time for those vital long sessions. If a walker is racing every Saturday then he

is going to miss out on his specific 50 km training. The idea that a race is always the best form of training is wrong in my estimation.

Better opportunities for 50km walkers

Of course, factors other than ill-conceived preparation can drag down performances. 50 km walkers need more incentive to improve their standards. In

recent seasons there have been ample international races for 20 km walkers, but almost nothing for the 50 km men. This is a difficult problem as many nations do not seem to be interested in competing over the longer distance. I think race organizers should look at 50 km courses and start times with an eye to fast times because this would do much to raise the morale of walkers.

