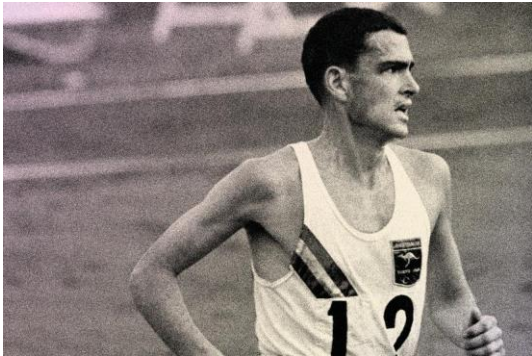


# Ron Clarke's Record-Setting 1965

Fifty years ago, the Australian legend changed the landscape of distance running.

By [Roger Robinson](#) Wednesday, June 17, 2015, 10:18 am [3 comments](#)



Ron Clarke en route to bronze in the 10,000m at the 1964 Tokyo Summer Olympics. Ed Lacy/Popperfoto/Getty Images

***Editor's Note:** [Ron Clarke passed away on June 16 at the age of 78](#). The Australian set 17 world records and was the first man to break 28:00 for 10,000 meters. The July/August issue of *Running Times* chronicles the story of one of the 11 world records Clarke set in 1965.*

**4:40 P.M., July 10, 1965, White City Stadium, London.**

The race we were excitedly waiting for was the 3-mile. At last, 20 runners emerged from the tunnel and began their stride-outs down below us on the old black cinder track. Instantly, we picked out the commanding figure of Ron Clarke, the new world-record holder from Australia. It took longer among the cluster of runners to find the teenage American phenomenon Gerry Lindgren, and we stared in astonishment that such a frail-looking boy could have shared the world 6-mile record with Billy Mills only two weeks before. We spotted European 5,000m champion Bruce Tulloh, barefoot as usual, and the blond Hungarian Lajos Mecser, the lanky Irishman Derek Graham, and—yes, there, bigger than anyone in the field except Clarke, Londoner Mike Wiggs, who 10 days earlier had replaced Tulloh as the British 5,000m record-holder.

This was a world-class field, the best our generation had seen on a British track. We leaned forward, stopwatches poised, as they shuffled into line to have their names checked. Twenty runners and 12,000 spectators went still for the English Amateur Athletic Association 3-mile championship.

**We four friends, young runners, watched from the White City stands.** You got a good, though distant, view in that famed, faded old stadium. Built for the 1908 London Olympics, it held 100,000 spectators back in those days. It even had its own midfield Olympic swimming pool where now the discus was in progress. In the 1960s, the down-at-heel stadium's main livelihood was from greyhound racing. The wire-fenced dog track and surrounding space for bookmakers' booths made a big gap between the crowd and the track and field action.

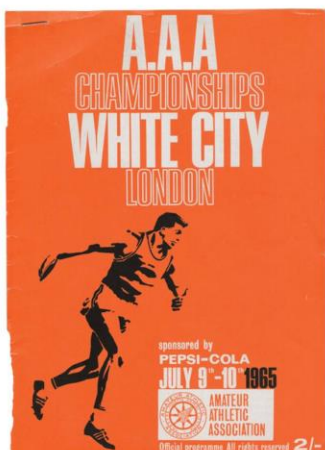
“Set!” As the runners leaned forward, I had mixed feelings. I should have been crouched and eager down there among them. In my best track season so far, I'd beaten several of the English runners and twice gotten under the time standard. I was aggrieved about missing the cut for the championship. As things turned out, I was lucky. The race about to start would become a milestone in history, a defining drama best witnessed from the fervor of the stands, not from a position of unhappy struggle at the back of the field.

“First lap 62—[Geoff] North.” I can still read the notes I made on the now-yellowing page of the championships program. I timed every lap. Stopwatches in 1965 were metal hemispheres that filled your

palm, a black hand sweeping around the circular face. You wound the spring by a beveled knob on top, pressing the same knob with your thumb to start and stop. We carried them everywhere, as young runners now carry their cell phones.

“Lap 2, 2:07, Lindgren. Lap 3, 3:11, Clarke. Lap 4, 4:15.4, Lindgren.” So says my long-treasured program. We expected it to be fast, but this was fantasy—8 seconds under world-record pace. No Olympic 5,000m final to that time had been close to this speed. And it showed. As Lindgren and Clarke alternated in the lead, it took them less than four laps to turn that talent-loaded field of champions into a line of desolate stragglers. Wiggs tried to stay in contact, but by the end of the first mile even he was gone.

“Lap 5, 5:20.4, Clarke. Lap 6, 6:26, Clarke.” Now it was Clarke in command—powerful, dignified, majestic. Lindgren was his shadow. Clarke’s official world record stood at 13:07.6, and he had a recent unratified 13:00.4. Today, we calculated with disbelief, he was on pace for well under 13 minutes.



020 2:07.2 3:11. 4:15.4 5:20.4 6:26 7:31.4 8:36.4 9:42 10:46 11:51  
 Note: Lindgren. Close. Lindgren Clarke. " Clarke. Clarke Clarke " "  
 36 Cl Wiggs = 12:52!!

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**Event 37** **THREE MILES**  
 4.45 p.m. A.A.A. Standard: 13 minutes 55 seconds  
 (Saturday) Challenge Cup presented by the late Earl of Jersey  
 HOLDER: L. Boguszewicz (Poland)

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**Amateur Records:**  
 WORLD'S RECORD: 13 min. 07.6 sec.—R. W. Clarke (Australia), at Melbourne, 3rd December, 1964. (Subject to ratification) 13 min. 00.4 sec.—R. W. Clarke (Australia), at Compton, Cal., 4th June, 1965.  
 UNITED KINGDOM (ALL COMERS), UNITED KINGDOM (NATIONAL) AND A.A.A. NATIONAL RECORDS: 13 min. 12.0 sec.—M. B. S. Tulloh, at Southampton, 17th August, 1961.  
 Subject to ratification U.K. (National) Record—13 min. 8.6 sec. M. E. Wiggs at Helsinki, 30th June, 1965.

**Best Championship Performance:**  
 M. B. S. Tulloh (Portsmouth A.C.) 13 min. 16.0 sec. at White City, 14th July, 1962

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1 ALTMANN, H. . . . . Welwyn A.C.	12 LETZNERICH, M. . . . . West Germany
2 BENNETT, P. . . . . Norway	18 LINDGREN, G. . . . . U.S.A.
3 BRIALLET, T. J. . . . . Ponders End A.C.	19 *LOOSLEY, C. R. . . . . Welsh A.A.A./
4 CLARKE, R. . . . . Australia	20 *McCAFFERTY, I. . . . . Motherwell Y.M.C.A. H.
5 COOKE, J. E. . . . . Portsmouth A.C.	21 MECSEK, L. . . . . Hungary
6 DUGGAN, F. . . . . Sparkhill H.	22 MILNER, A. H. . . . . Walton A.C.
7 FUGLEM, O. . . . . Norway	23 MURRAY, A. F. . . . . Edinburgh University A.C.
8 GOWAN, M. . . . . Herne Hill H.	24 NORTH, GEOFF. A. . . . . Belgrave H.
9 GRAHAM, D. A. . . . . 9th Old Boys H.	25 PRELAND, L. R. . . . . Surrey A.C.
10 HERRING, J. B. . . . . Blackheath H.	26 STRONG, E. . . . . Bristol A.C.
11 HILL, R. . . . . N.C.A.A./Bolton United H.	27 *TAYLOR, R. G. . . . . M.C.A.A.A. Coventry
12 HOLEN, J. J. . . . . S.C.A.A.A./Polytechnic H.	28 TULLOH, M. B. S. . . . . Godiva H.
13 IBBOTSON, D. G. . . . . Longwood A.C.	29 WIGGS, M. E. . . . . Portsmouth A.C.
14 JOHNSTON, T. F. K. . . . . Portsmouth A.C.	30 WILKINSON, W. . . . . Thames Valley H.
15 JOHNSTON, T. F. K. . . . . Achilles C.	31 WILKINSON, W. . . . . Longwood H.
16 KEELY, D. B. N.C.A.A./Derby & County A.C.	32 M. Bogue

1st Clarke 12 min. 52.4 World Rec. 4th M. Bogue 13 min. 15.8 sec.  
 2nd Lindgren 13 min. 04.2 sec. 5th Wilkinson 13 min. 17.4 sec.  
 3rd Mecsek 13 min. 07.6 sec. 6th Murray 13 min. 21.2 sec.

Intermediate Times, 1 Mile: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec. 2 Miles: \_\_\_\_\_ min. \_\_\_\_\_ sec.

STANDARDS (13 min. 55 sec.) Nos. \_\_\_\_\_

Tulloh 12.0 13:48

The author took notes in the program of the 1965 English Amateur Athletic Association Championships.

**Out there on the black Cinders, It was a new reality, even for champions.**

“After running 4:18 for the first mile and going through halfway inside my PR pace at 6:33, I was burned off—as was everybody else,” Tulloh says, reflecting on the race 50 years later. “Even then, we knew this was completely changing the landscape.” Clarke was not as engrossed in lap times as we were, with our overheating stopwatches.

“I didn’t hear any of the lap calls,” Clarke says. “I knew it was fast, but I was not thinking about the world record, just about winning. At first I thought it was great to have Lindgren helping to press the pace. Usually everyone else sat back and left me to dictate. But I started to think I would not be able to get rid of him.”

Lindgren was in unknown territory for a 19-year-old not long out of high school.

“In high school, the gun goes off, you go. So I led much of the first laps,” Lindgren says. “When Clarke raced around me, he really pushed hard, and most of those first 10 laps I wondered how long I could keep going. But I tried to match his stride.”

At halfway Clarke began racing. He towed Lindgren through 2 miles in 8:36, only 3 seconds outside the British record. On the ninth lap the stubborn little American edged cheekily in front. Clarke watched him for a while, like a tiger looking at a mouse, then began to put in surges, raising the overall tempo to a destructive 63-second 10th lap.

“Not many observers discerned the surges, but there were three or four, each 50 to 90 meters, and they broke Lindgren’s rhythm,” Clarke says.

Lindgren confirms that the first surge was critical.

“On the ninth lap, Clarke eased up just a bit, which I welcomed,” Lindgren says. “I was so tired. But then, going into a bend, he took off with a gust and before I could get my weary legs to go, he was several steps ahead. But I learned a good race strategy from him that day, as I used it to slow down many times in my racing career.”

So Clarke was away, on his own, how he liked it best. He was sublime when he got free. At age 28, he ran with mature power—upright, rhythmic, and with an upper-body composure that set him apart from his greatest predecessors. Zatopek, Kuts, Pirie, Halberg, all ran tormented with effort, twisted and eccentric. Clarke’s close-cropped head never bobbed and his arms never flailed. Calm, controlled, imperturbable—that’s how he looked as we watched in awe from the stands. Against skinny, striving young Lindgren, he appeared like a sedate demigod brushing away an impertinent schoolboy.

But inner human reality may be different than appearances. Clarke nearly missed that race. Two days earlier, he says (unbeknownst to any until now), he had heard that his wife’s mother was dying.

“I had three races to go. [My wife] Helen talked me out of flying back to Australia with her, saying there was nothing I could do except support her and she knew how well I had peaked,” he says. “Frankly, I just wanted to get the run out of the way, compete in Oslo and Paris, and get back home to comfort Helen.”



(Express/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

*White City Stadium in London, where Ron Clarke set the 3-mile world record in 1965.*

**No man goes into no-man's land without paying a price.** Though every writer called Clarke “relaxed,” that’s not how it felt to him.



“Believe me, I was hurting,” Clarke says. “All my races felt hard. Whereas Zatopek, for instance, used to grimace as if each step was agony, I tried to develop a stoic appearance, so my opponents had little idea how tough I was finding it.”

While Clarke looked serene, we spectators were going out of our heads. As he disposed of lap after lap, as the world record became an astonishing certainty, each sector of the crowd began spontaneously to rise to its feet when he went royally past. It was a sort of adoring wave 15 years before they were invented.

Then, in some unspoken way, we all felt the need to get closer to this great work of humankind. As if responding to the urgings of a charismatic prophet, we were drawn out of our seats and forward down the aisles. Through the last three laps, 12,000 people were clustered around the perimeter dog track fence. The high tiers of seating we had paid for were left empty.

We must have been whooping, but mostly I remember simply standing there, watching every stride in a sort of stunned awe.

Clarke remembers the crowd’s reaction.

“I began to think it must be fast when I saw many other athletes running across the dog track in excitement, and the crowd noise was deafening, so I knew I must be running something special. It added to my own excitement and helped me forget the pain,” he says. “Adrenaline and pain are a heady mixture.”

The last two laps belonged wholly to Clarke. Alone, he went striding into a new world. He kicked to a 60.1-second last lap, at last showing the effort. I clicked my windup stopwatch. The official time was 12:52.4.

**Why were we so awestruck?** Partly it was the sheer scale of the breakthrough. Roger Bannister in those days used to speak about records being broken by ever-diminishing fractions, yet here was a man who had hacked off 18 seconds from the world record as it stood only five weeks earlier (Murray Halberg, 13:10.0). Bannister’s sub-4:00 mile was the climax to years of effort and debate. Clarke put the figure “12” in the book before anyone even thought of it as relevant.

Partly it was Clarke himself who compelled our admiration. At that date, he had not yet been condemned to go down in history as the man who couldn’t win (as he later would be, after Olympic disappointment). He did win, often and well, as on this day. Lindgren ran 13:04, one of his best races, 6 seconds faster than anyone ever, except Clarke. Mecser, in third, ran a tactically impeccable 13:07.6 to become the third-fastest man in history in the 3-mile. But both were confidently and skillfully beaten.

Clarke did it all by relentless training and fearless racing. He never dodged any opponent. In 1965, he raced 46 times, plus local club races in Melbourne. Tragically for him, the 1966 Commonwealth Games were to be in the heat of Jamaica and the 1968 Olympics in the high altitude of Mexico City, where he nearly died and was given emergency oxygen on the track. It took Zatopek, in a now-revered gesture of generosity, to privately present Clarke with the Olympic gold medal he deserved.

Those disappointments lay ahead. In 1965, we knew only that Clarke was making that post-Olympic year a time of heady excitement. In 10 months, he broke 11 world records at eight distances, from 2 miles to 1 hour. He didn’t just break those records; he transformed them. Only four days after he impelled us down to the fence at White City, Clarke electrified a different crowd—25,000 strong at Bislett Stadion, Oslo—with a 10,000m world record of 27:39.4. That hacked 34.6 seconds off the world record he had set only a month earlier. He passed 6 miles in 26:47, breaking the Lindgren/Mills mark by 24.6 seconds. That totals 70 seconds off world records in four days.

There has never been a one-man rampage like it. Even Paavo Nurmi and Haile Gebrselassie rank behind Clarke for the sheer scale and range of record breaking.



( AP Images)

*Ron Clarke and Gerry Lindgren take the lap of honor after the race where Clarke ran a world record and Lindgren the American record.*

**We four friends went to a runners party in London that evening.** We felt tipsy before we even left White City. Clarke's run intoxicated us, but we understood what it meant. The sport we loved and labored at was never going to be the same. All the runners at that party, and all the runners in the world, would have to rethink their commitment to running, and either give it away or raise their sights.

No more half measures or half effort, no relaxed loping like the graceful distance runners on Greek vases. Instead, hammer past halfway a few seconds outside your best and then kick the last miles faster. Get strong enough to absorb extra distance with only minimal loss of pace. That was what we had to train for now. Bedford, Viren, Gebrselassie, Radcliffe, every great Kenyan marathoner—all have run in the image Clarke created 50 years ago.

"We were blown away, physically and mentally. Everyone had to change their ideas about what was a good time," Tulloh says.

This was not a comforting message for those of modest talent. Before July 1965, I had cut my 3-mile PR to within 40 seconds of the world record—close enough to dream. Suddenly, I watched Clarke move the top level of the sport beyond my imaginable reach.

Get over it, I thought. You didn't become a runner because it's easy. Ron Clarke showed us that great running can be a thing of wonder, a perfect fusion of body, mind, and spirit—something, as the old Greeks believed, that can put mere humans closer to the gods. Yes, the mountain was now higher, and farther away, but it was all the more worth trying to climb. That was what Clarke's run meant for me that night, and for 50 years it has never ceased to be true.