

Track and Field



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Roger Moens' Consolation

The New Zealander Peter Snell is the only middle-distance runner to have won three individual gold medals at the Olympic Games. Surprise winner of the 800 m in the Rome Games in 1960, he capped this four years later in Tokyo with an extraordinary 800 and 1500 m double.

A talented tennis and rugby player (he has a powerful physique), Peter Snell did not take up running until he was 18 years old. Coached by Arthur Lydiard, he went through blistering training sessions, averaging 100 miles a week, on the track, roads, over the fields and, most of all, over very rough country.

He was not a popular choice for the Rome Olympics in 1960. He had had only one victory over the famous Australian Herb Elliott, who had been way off form in that race. In Rome, the Belgian Roger Moens, world record-holder with 1 min 45.7 sec, was the clear favorite. But he was beaten by Snell in the semi-finals (1 min 47.2 sec as against 1 min 47.4 sec) and in the final where, leading as they came into the final straight, he could not live with the New Zealander's finish (1 min 46.3 sec and 1 min 46.5 sec).

Bitterly disappointed by his defeat at the hands (or should it be feet?) of an "unknown", Roger Moens was inconsolable until, four years later, he watched his Roman conqueror's victories in both the 800 and 1500 m: "I see my 1960 defeat in a new light now. I was beaten on that occasion by one of the greatest runners of all time", he said in Tokyo.

Meanwhile, Peter Snell had astonished the world of athletics by breaking the world mile record with 3 min 54.4 sec, one-tenth of a second better than Herb Elliott. He had achieved this time by almost total front-running on a grass track in Wanganui.

PETER SNELL

Born Dec. 17, 1938, in Opunake, NZL

AWARDS AND RECORDS

OG 1960: gold medal, 800 m

OG 1964: gold medal, 800 m

gold medal, 1500 m

His world records:

800 m in 1 min 44.3 sec on Dec. 3, 1962, in Christchurch (1 min 45.1 sec over 880 yards)

1000 m in 2 min 15.6 sec on Nov. 12, 1964, in Auckland

Mile in 3 min 54.4 sec on Jan. 27, 1962, in Wanganui, later 3 min 54.1 sec on Nov. 1964, in Auckland

Retired from athletics in 1965

OG in Tokyo (1964): Peter Snell had carefully prepared his twin victory (800 m and 1,500 m)