

Air Force Promotion of Walking as a Sport

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International participation in sports is well known today as witnessed by Olympic competition and other world games. However, worldwide participation in a non-competitive family fitness activity, especially happening on the same day, is otherwise unknown to the world of sports. June 6, 1981, was the start of what has become an annual event in the world of volksmarching (people's walking). "Global" volksmarching was the concept of the United States Air Force. The plan was that "the first Air Force base west of the international date line would start the first volkswalk at sunrise June 6, 1981. Other bases in succession westward would start their events 'following the sun' until the entire globe of the world was circled" (*The American Wanderer*, April 1981, p. 1). Andersen Air Force Base, Guam held the first walk and Tin City Air Force Station, Alaska conducted the last walk event on June 6th.

The Department of the Air Force had decided to sponsor volksmarches, ten kilometer walks over a pre-marked route where participants travel at their own pace, as part of their 1981 program of worldwide sports championships and recreation contests. These walks would be known as "U.S. Air Force Volksmarch: Global One (I). All of the sports activities would be part of the special series of programs being offered at Air Force bases around the world in recognition of the 'Year of the Family'. The Global One (1) Volksmarch would be a major event and would be open to the general public. Colonel Heinz Johnson was appointed by the Air Force as the director of this unique worldwide participation. Colonel Johnson at that time was Assistant Director of Awards and Records for the national governing body of volkssporting in the USA, the American Volkssport Association.

June 6, 1944 is known as D-day in world history, the day when the Allies invaded Normandy and helped turn the tide for World War II. June 6, 1981 may be considered W-Day (walk day) in sport history as the U.S. Air Force and the American Volkssport Association unfolded the around-the-world volksmarching concept. The first Global resulted in 106 installations and 23,937 people participating. The ninth Global took place in 1989 and the concept of worldwide fitness promotion through walking is still alive and well through the joint efforts of the USAF and the AVA. Since 1981, the program has grown to the point where participation regularly exceeds 20,000 people at more than 110 different locations world wide. The Air Force believes that volkssport events, especially walks, are an excellent way to reach all segments of the Air Force community. "There are few other noncompetitive activities which provide a social environment for families, friends, & community members." (*Global Volkssport Training Aid*, 1989).

Not to be outdone the Army began promoting volksmarching with the designation of September 19-25, 1982, as the Department of the Army Volksmarch Week. "The Army promotes volksmarching as a morale, welfare and recreation (MWR) program because it encourages fitness, provides an opportunity for people to share common interests, enables people of all ages to obtain recognition and, most of all, it's fun." (*The American Wanderer*, Summer 1982, p. 9). In addition the Army published "Army Pamphlet 28-13—The Army Volksmarch Program" to help bases prepare for the week. This program is still in existence with the most recent event occurring on May 18-20, 1990.

As an outcome of this global promotion of walking for personal fitness, the American Volkssport Association began an involvement with the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports. During May the walks conducted under the supervision of the AVA are also held in conjunction with the National Physical Fitness and Sports Month. Youth and family fitness through walking has been and continues to be a goal of the Armed Forces, the AVA and the President's Council.