

50 KM AUSTRALIAN MEN RECORDS AND RANKINGS

Several weeks ago, I zoomed in on the Australian Men 20 km racewalking record and mapped its progression. To complete the picture for the men, here is the corresponding analysis for the other key international distance, the 50 km.

The 50 km distance was contested within the various Australian States from the 1920s onwards. For instance, the first Victorian 50 km championship was held in 1929 and was won by Moreland walker Jack Cummins in 5.30.00. With the 50 km distance added to the Olympics in 1936, it is therefore somewhat surprising that the first Australian championship was not held until 1952 when Victorian Len Chadwick won in 5:10:58.

Times throughout this period were generally over 5 hours for several reasons – the lack of serious and consistent long distance training, the lack of good footwear and, most importantly, the harshness of the race rules. On many occasions, one feed station might be provided, at the turn in an out and back course (ie at the 15 mile mark). Even then, only a cup of water might be on offer.

The early trend setters were mostly Victorian and the best-on-record road times progressed slowly up to 1948 when Bill Behan of NSW won the Victorian 50 km title with 4:53:53.

50 km road walk	5.03.20	Coffey, Jack (VIC)	1931	Melbourne, VIC
50 km road walk	5.02.28	Gaylor, James (VIC)	1933	Melbourne, VIC
50 km road walk	4.55.36	Cummins, Jack (VIC)	1934	Melbourne, VIC
50 km road walk	4.53.53	Behan, William (NSW)	1948	Melbourne, VIC



Start of the 1939 Victorian 50 km championship at the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds. Jim Gaylor is second from the left.

By 1955, Victorian walker Les Hellyer had reduced the time slightly to 4:51:04.4, done in Centennial Park in Sydney, ahead of NSW walker Peter Waddell whose time of 4:53:33 also beat the existing best-on-record.

50 km road walk	4.51:04.4	Les Hellyer (VIC)	17/09/1955	Sydney, NSW
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The first big breakthrough came in 1956 when fellow Victorian Ray Smith won the 1956 Australian 50 km title race and Olympic trial. This event was held on the Olympic Games course in Melbourne 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 in the 50 km for the 1956 Olympic Games.

50 km road walk	4:40:24.6	Ray Smith (VIC)	09/09/1956	Melbourne, VIC
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Ray's euphoria was short lived. Three weeks later, yet another Victorian, Ted Allsopp, walking in his first ever 50 km event in the Victorian Championship, astonished everyone with his time of 4:24:24. He started the event only as a training session (as he had already been selected in the Olympic team to contest the 20 km event) and was 6 minutes behind Norm Read at the 17 mile mark. But Ted's intensive training program had given him such a wonderful combination of speed and stamina that he was able to go on and win the event by over 20 minutes. He was duly added

to the 50 km team alongside Ray Smith.

50 km road walk	4:24:24	Ted Allsopp (VIC)	29/09/1956	Flemington, VIC
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The next year, in the 1957 Victorian 50 km event, Ted took a further minute off his best-on-record time and then again in the 1959 Victorian championship, he chipped away another minute.

50 km road walk	4:23:38	Ted Allsopp (VIC)	28/09/1957	Flemington, VIC
50 km road walk	4:22:20.8	Ted Allsopp (VIC)	26/09/1959	Flemington, VIC

Finally in 1959, the Amateur Athletic Union of Australia added the 50,000 track walk to its lists of official records and Ted was the inaugural record holder, compliments of a fine 4:22:41 walk. The next year, he reduced this to 4:20:28 with an even better track performance. Ted was indeed king of both the road and the track over the 50 km distance (and he also held the World 2 Hour track walking record, set in 1956).

50 km track walk	4:22:41.8	Ted Allsopp (VIC)	23/08/1958	
50 km track walk	4:20:28.2	Ted Allsopp (VIC)	22/08/1959	



Ray Smith in track mode in 1952 and Bob Gardiner and Ted Allsopp in the 1968 Victorian 20 km championship

As the 1960s progressed, so did the form of young Victorian walker Bob Gardiner. Chasing Noel Freeman over the 20 km distance and Ted over the 50 km distance, his big breakthrough came in 1964 when he won the 1964 Olympic 50 km trial on 6 June in Adelaide in 4:24:19.2. His subsequent 5th place in the Tokyo Olympic 50 km in an Australian best on record time of 4:17:06 was not a once-off. It was the result of hard work and determination and signalled the start of a long and distinguished international career for Bob.

50 km road walk	4:17.06	Bob Gardiner (VIC)	18/10/1964	Tokyo, Japan
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On 24 September 1966, Bob won the Victorian 50 km title in 4:18:20.8, just a minute slower than his Tokyo time and the fastest ever 50 km done on Australian soil. In 1967, he again broke the 4:20 barrier with 4:19:59 and as 1968 loomed, he was in unbeatable form. It was no surprise to anyone when in early May 1968, Bob won the Australian 50 km championship and Olympic trial by more than 5 minutes. The course in Toowoomba in Queensland was a tough hilly one and the race was held in bleak conditions. His time of 4:22:23 was impressive in the circumstances.

As the Olympics drew near, Bob intensified his training and racing and his final hitouts were impressive and, on August 24 in a VAWC Track 50 km event at Melbourne University, he won in 4:14:17, setting new Commonwealth, Australian and Victorian records and showing that he was a dangerous dark horse for the forthcoming Olympic 50 km event. I was fortunate enough to witness that walk and I still remember the constant pace with which he ate up the 125 laps.

50 km track walk	4:14:19.0	Bob Gardiner (VIC)	24/08/1968	Melbourne, VIC
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Two weeks later, he finished 4th from a scratch start in the classic Melbourne to Frankston 25 Mile event. His time was a sensational 3:20:46 and he pulled up fresh and looked to have plenty in reserve. He left for Mexico with high expectations but like most of us, he had no idea of the toll that the high altitude and heat would exact from his body. In the Olympic 50 km, after a good start, he gradually lost ground and faded back through the field. His last 10 km was walked in the semi darkness with people wandering across the course. His 19th place in 4:52:29 was a great personal disappointment but still a gutsy effort.

Bob's times stood uncontested for another decade before a quietly spoken Ballarat walker, Willi Sawall, took the Australian racewalking scene by storm in 1976. He contested the 1976 Olympic 20 km trial in April but was disqualified. It was just a month too early in his career. From then on, he was untouchable. In the ensuing 1976 winter season, he won the Victorian 10,000m track title in a new Australian record of 43:36, the Victorian 30 km (2:23:30), 15 km (1:07:34), 20 km (equalled Noel Freeman's Australian best time of 1:29:12), the VRWC club 50 km (an Australian best of 4:12:20), the LBG 20 miles title (2:33:29) and won a track 50 km walk at the Glenhuntly track in 4:06:39.0 for a new Commonwealth record.

50 km track walk	4:06:39.0	Willi Sawall (VIC)	14/08/1976	Melbourne, VIC
50 km road walk	4:12:12	Willi Sawall (VIC)	12/09/1976	Melbourne, VIC

The next year, his winning time in the Victorian 50 km roadwalking championship was even faster – 4:05:54.

50 km road walk	4:05:54	Willi Sawall (VIC)	10/07/1977	Melbourne, VIC
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1979 saw 4 hours broken for the first time in Australia as Willi won the 1979 Lugano Cup trial trial in Australian record time of 3:56:07. It was a tremendous breakthrough in world rankings for Australia. Willi, with his hard training and aggressive approach, was responsible for the phenomenal improvement in the 1980s. In the next decade Dave Smith, Simon Baker, Andrew Jachno, Sue Cook and Kerry Saxby were placed in world or Commonwealth Games. In Germany at the Lugano Cup meet, Willi reduced the Australian 50 km best time to 3:51:08 for 10th place.

50 km road walk	3:56:07	Willi Sawall (VIC)	15/07/1979	Melbourne, VIC
50 km road walk	3:51:08	Willi Sawall (VIC)	30/09/1979	Eschborn, Germany

In Sydney at the March 1980 National track 3,000m championships, Willi clocked 11:32 to retain his title for the fourth consecutive year. He followed this with a fine win in April 1980 in the Olympic 50 km trial in Adelaide. His time of 3:46:34 broke his previous best yet again and ensured him Olympic berths in both the 20 km and 50 km events.

50 km road walk	3:46:34	Willi Sawall (VIC)	06/04/1980	Sydney, NSW
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Willi held sway over the 50 km distance for the next few years, breaking 4 hours on a number of occasions. Andrew Jachno was the closest with 4:01 in 1984 but it was not until 1987 that a second Australian walker finally broke the 4 hour mark – Simon Baker with 3:58:51 in December 1987 in Melbourne. Simon's rise to the top was meteoric – within 12 months of that performance, his Olympic exploits left us looking for superlatives. His tough task – to walk both the 20 km and 50 km event in Seoul – was not easy but the way in which he executed it left no doubt about his real walking capabilities. His 11th place in the 20 km event in 1:21:47 was outstanding but this was overshadowed by his 6th place in the 50 km walk. Journalist Len Johnson described his finish in the 50 km event as *“the excited extrovert who spent the 10 minutes after crossing the line falling around like a puppet dangling on tangled strings, joyously celebrating his own performance with every other walker in sight”*. The time of 3:44:07 was a PB and a new Commonwealth best.. Behind him, Andrew Jachno raced to his own PB of 3:53:23, becoming the third Australian to beat the 4 hour mark.

50 km road walk	3:44:07	Simon Baker (VIC)	30/09/1988	Seoul, South Korea
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Willi Sawall (23) contests the 1980 Olympic 50 km and Simon Baker wins the 1989 World Cup 50 km

Come the World Walking Championship in Barcelona in May 1989 and Simon was in the best form of his career.

His plan was to sit with the leaders until half way and then apply pressure and he executed his plan perfectly. On the 13th lap of the 25 lap course, he surged to the lead and increased his pace. Within 2 laps, he had a lead of 20-25 seconds. Out in front, Simon just concentrated on his technique while behind him the leading pack gradually fragmented as it unsuccessfully chased him. With 2 laps to go, the lead had increased to 80 seconds and the chasing pack was broken. Simon's finishing time of 3:43:13 bettered his Seoul time by over a minute. Russian Andrey Perlov, the world's fastest in 1987, was 2nd in 3:44:12. Of the finishing stages of the race, Simon said *"By the finish of the race, because it was the Russians who were chasing me, just about the whole crowd was yelling at me to keep going. It was quite emotional in the last two laps with all the cheering and support there. That just kept pushing me through."*

50 km **road** walk 3:43:13 Simon Baker (VIC) 25/08/1989 Barcelona, Spain

Simon now knew it was time to attack Willi's track record and this he did in style in September 1990, slashing the Commonwealth and Australian 50 km track records to win the Victorian title at the Box Hill track. He cut a massive 22 minutes off Englishman Chris Maddock's 1984 record of 4:05:47, finishing in 3:43:50. It was the fastest 50 km for the year and less than 2 minutes outside Raul Gonzalez's world record. In this walk, he broke 4 Victorian and Australian records - his 25 km time of 1:52:24 (this broke Ted Allsopp's famous 1956 record), his 30 km time of 2:14:22, his 40 km time of 2:57:57 and of course his 50 km time of 3:43:50.

50 km **track** walk 3:43:50 Simon Baker (VIC) 09/09/1990 Melbourne, VIC

In 1992, Dariusz Wojcik became the 4th Australian to break the 4 hour mark, recording 3:58:30 in Melbourne in January. Interestingly, Dariusz is the only sub 4 hour Australian walker never to have made an Australian team – it is fair to say that the cards did not fall his way during his career.

Throughout the nineties, more Australian walkers joined the sub-four club – Michael Harvey (3:57:20 in 1993), Duane Cousins (3:54:38 in 1995), Dion Russell (3:48:12 in 1997), Dominic McGrath (3:59:12 in 1997) and Nathan Deakes (3:52:53 in 1999) - but no one showed the form likely to challenge the times of Willi and Simon.

Finally Nathan Deakes emerged from the pack as the most likely successor with a time of 3:43:43, done in Naumburg in Germany in April 2001. It took a further two years to bridge the gap but in December 2003, Nathan finally did it in winning the 2004 World Cup 50 km trial at Albert Park in Melbourne. No one (except perhaps Nathan and his coach Brent Vallance) was ready for the time – an astounding 3:39:43 – a four minute PB and the 11th fastest 50 km performance of all time. Each 10 km was faster than the one before and he left the field reeling in his wake.

50 km **road** walk 3:39:43 Nathan Deakes (VIC) 07/12/2003 Melbourne, VIC

Over the next few years, Nathan was unbeatable on the local front over all distances and he racked up a whole series of international placings over the 20 km and 50 km distances. One impressive triple was in March 2006 when he strode to a new Commonwealth 5000m track walk record of 18:45.19 in an A Series meet in Melbourne and the only weeks later repeated his Manchester Commonwealth Games double with two new Games records – winning the 20 km in 1:19:55 and the 50 km in 3:42:53.



Nathan Deakes on his way to a new 50 km world record of 3:35:47 in December 2006

Nathan's finest moment arguably came in December 2006 when he won the Australian 50 km championship in front of

a home crowd in Geelong. The course was less than satisfactory, twisting and turning around the harbour area. It has several small but steep inclines and walkers had to negotiate a variety of surfaces. To top things off, a blustery wind buffeted walkers as they negotiated the tricky course. But nothing could stop Nathan. His first 4 10 km splits were 43:30, 42:30, 42:00 and 42:30. At the 40 km mark, he was 3 minutes under World Record pace. He needed all of that buffer as he slowed in the final laps but the result was never in doubt. He crossed the finish line in 3:35:47 to break the existing World Record by 16 seconds. It was without doubt the greatest race in his career this far. It was no surprise when, in February, he was awarded the prestigious Australian Male Athlete of the Year in the 2006 Australian Sporting Awards.

50 km **road** walk 3:35:47 Nathan Deakes (VIC) 02/12/2006 Geelong, VIC (**WR**)

The emergence of Jared Tallent (3:39:27 in August 2008 at the Beijing Olympics) has now provided Australia with a second sub 3:40 walker. Simon Baker's 1990 track record of 3:43:50 still stands uncontested but it must now look an attractive prize for either Nathan or Jared. But it is a very tough record and a track 50,000m is very different to a road 50 km. It may well stand the test of time for the foreseeable future.

Now onto the all time ranking list. Quite a few of the names have been discussed above. All are good walkers, some great. In total, 15 Australians have broken 4 hours for the 50 km distance. In what is a great show of current 50 km depth, six of these times have been done since 2006. Of additional interest is the fact that the top 7 walkers on the list are or were top 20 km walkers whose 20 km PBs are all under 82 minutes. The moral of the story – to be a top 50 km walker, you need to be a very fast 20 km walker.

1	3:35:47	Nathan Deakes	VIC	17/08/1977	1	Melbourne	02/12/2006
2	3:39:27	Jared Tallent	VIC	17/01/1984	2	Beijing	22/08/2008
3	3:43:13	Simon Baker	VIC	6/02/1958	1	L'Hospitalet	28/05/1989
4	3:46:34	Willi Sawall	VIC	7/11/1941	1	Adelaide	06/04/1980
5	3:47:34	Dion Russell	VIC	8/05/1975	1	Melbourne	13/12/1998
6	3:47:45	Luke Adams	NSW	22/10/1976	10	Beijing	22/08/2008
7	3:52:49	Adam Rutter	NSW	24/12/1986	2	Melbourne	16/12/2007
8	3:53:19	Duane Cousins	VIC	13/07/1973	2	Melbourne	02/12/2006
9	3:53:23	Andrew Jachno	VIC	10/03/1957	19	Seoul	30/09/1988
10	3:54:37	Liam Murphy	SA	5/06/1979	1	Melbourne	13/05/2001
11	3:55:05	Darren Bown	SA	3/06/1974	2	Melbourne	13/05/2001
12	3:57:20	Michael Harvey	VIC	5/12/1962	1	Hawkesbury	10/07/1993
13	3:57:51	Dominic McGrath	VIC	4/06/1972	2	Leamington Spa	23/04/2000
14	3:58:22	Chris Erickson	VIC	1/12/1981	3	Melbourne	24/03/2006
15	3:58:30	Dariusz Wojcik	VIC	24/09/1959	1	Melbourne	26/01/1992