

AUSTRALIA AND THE WOMEN'S 50KM

Women officially entered the 50km world last week, with the IAAF finally recognizing the world record of 4:08:26, set by Portuguese walker Inez Henriques in January. The next battle is now to work for equality in major championships and ensure that women have the opportunity to compete over both 20km and 50km, like their male counterparts.

Australia has a very limited history of 50km walking for women. Let's have a look.

We all know that women were 'sheltered' from all longer events, due to the misconception that they would not be able to perform without damage to their delicate bodies. In Australia, women walkers were only allowed to compete over ridiculously short distances like 440 yards, 880 yards and 1 mile right up till the 1930's. Even when women were welcomed into the official racewalk championships, they started with 5km (the seventies), worked their way up to 10km (the eighties) and only transitioned to 20km in the nineties. It is only this year that we are starting to see a serious push to the 50km distance.

It was not until the 1970's that Australian women started to challenge the distance barriers and the first of those was **Lillian Harpur**. Lillian walked in South Australia from 1970 until 1983. I remember Lillian well as she held many Australian Titles over the shorter distances of 3000m and 5000m and was renowned for her fighting spirit and never-say-die attitude. Many times she staggered over the line in complete exhaustion - a trait that few of us can develop - the ability to push ourselves to the absolute limit. During the period from 1971 to 1976 she was pre-eminent and from 1976 onwards, she had many great battles with the up and coming Sue Cook. Overall in the 1970s she placed in national championships on 17 occasions and had 6 Australian Championship victories.

However, her greatest walks were over the longer distances, and were generally unacknowledged and unrecognised. Lillian came to Australia in 1970 from Ireland and in her very first season at the age of 22 and with a young baby, she completed the SA 50km event in **5:27:11**. This stood as the fastest 50km time by an Australian woman for many years. When I asked Lillian how she had done such a feat in her first season of racewalking, she acknowledged that she had a background of trekking in the dales of Ireland. The officials of that era in SA refused to acknowledge her long walks and never put her performances in the results. Thus the papers never record her performances and the official results never mention her. How tunnel-visioned many people were just a short while ago.

Lillian did not carry on with the distance events under such adverse circumstances, only completing the occasional one. What a shame! If she could walk so well over the 50 km distance in her first season, what could she have done if she had had the motivation to keep going. An indication her potential is to be seen in her 30km time of **2:47:13**, achieved on 23 Aug 1981 in the SA State Championship. She was in fact second overall to Peter Fullager and finished just ahead of George White. Now a 30km time of that is equivalent to breaking the 3 hour barrier for the 20 miles distance.

This remained the best until ACT walker **Lisa Wilson**, aged 36, walked a time of **5:23:08** in the WMA Non-Stadia Championships in Auckland, New Zealand, on 23 April 2004. It was one of those occasions when the 50km walk was included on the program.

That time was eventually beaten by Victorian walker **Michelle Thompson**, aged 42, who walked a time of **5:13:14** in the VRWC 50km Championship on 11 September 2011. That now stands as the best 50km time any Australian.



Lillian Harpur (1983) and Michelle Thompson (Oct 2011)

So our 50km women remain well off the pace but only because it has never been a recognized event up till now. By way of comparison, consider the best times done by female walkers in the 20 Miles walk at the annual Lake Burley Griffin carnival in Canberra.

1.	Regan Lamble	VIC	2:32:17	2012
2.	Kerry Saxby-Junna	NSW	2:41:43	2000
3.	Megan Szirom	VIC	2:49:54	2009
4.	Simone Wolowiec	VIC	2:55:14	2000
5.	Celia Bertei	VIC	3:13:00	1994
6.	Shiela Miller	VIC	3:14:08	1981
7.	Ann Staunton	ACT	3:26:26	1993
8.	Marlaine Stanway	VIC	3:27:48	1982
9.	Michelle Thompson	VIC	3:29:14	2011
10.	Karyn O'Neill	VIC	3:46:59	2015

It is fair to say that if any of Regan, Kerry, Megan or Simone had done a 50km during their time, they would have been well under 5 hours.

The challenge now for Australia is to provide the opportunities for women to walk 50km and help them perform to their best in this most beautiful of events.