

WHY ARE AUSTRALIAN RACE WALKERS AMONGST THE BEST IN THE WORLD? by BOB CRUISE

While our Australian racewalking efforts pale into insignificance when compared with the Russian experience, we have consistently performed above expectations in the sport of racewalking and are currently looked upon as one of power houses. It is indeed timely that Bob Cruise has forwarded the following to me for review.

Why are Australian race walkers amongst the best in the world?

Last year, just prior to the Olympics, I was asked by Tim O'Shannesy, distance running development officer with Athletics Australia, why I thought Australian race walkers were so good and whether the walking community had a master plan? Tim's question encouraged me to reflect on why our walkers are where they are today in the international arena. Our recent and past success is due to many factors and influences. Some of these are listed below.

- 1. The National Family of Race Walking:** Race walking in Australia is a small and relatively coherent group of enthusiasts. It is characterised by a number of clubs that have been in existence for nearly 100 years and numerous others that are prepared, in often difficult circumstances and frequently in an environment that in many cases in neither supportive nor encouraging, to provide for administration, coaching and competition. Race walking has groups of followers in all states of Australia, that, despite the above, continue to pursue and support race walking at a local, national and when appropriate at international level. When comparing race walking to any other track and field discipline in Australia it is very apparent that the followers and participants of race walking are members of a dedicated and committed family.
- 2. Our Race Walking Heritage:** We have performed exceptionally at international level over many years. The Europeans regard race walking as their sport. Yet we have compted as equals with them for many years. Walkers such as George Knott, Bob Gardiner, Ron Crawford, Ray Smith, Sue Cook, Sally Pearson, Noel Freeman, Willi Sawall, David Smith, Simon Baker, Kerry Saxby, Nick A'Hern, Jane Saville and currently Nathan Deakes ,Luke Adams and Jared Tallent are our walking heroes. These heroes continue to work with and support our developing athletes. This is something not seen in many other track and field disciplines. Our race walking heritage has been documented in a number of race walking books written by Peter Waddell, Mark Donahoo and Tim Erickson and Bob Cruise. Tim Erickson's 'Heel & Toe' is read widely around the world.
- 3. Coaches:** Australia has many race walking coaches of high quality. These are spread across the country with the majority, not surprisingly, being in the most populated states. Coaches such as Simon Baker, Mark Donahoo, Harry Summers, Paul Rance, Jim Leppik and Tim Erickson in Victoria and Anne Saville and Kevin Stone in New South Wales have contributed significantly to our sport and continue to do so. Likewise David Smith in Queensland (now National Coach of Korea), Phil Holloway and Ric Cattermole in Western Australia, Kerry Saxby-Junna in the Australian Capital Territory and Stan Malbut, John Pearce and Bob Cruise in South Australia. Most of these coaches are happy to coach at junior and youth levels and seek to provide their better athletes with opportunities that will enable them to get to the Australian Institute of Sport on scholarship.
- 4. Australian Institute of Sport:** The AIS was developed specifically for elite athletes. It has, in recent years, taken on a more encompassing role. It now provides support for Athletics Australia youth and junior development squads. The current AIS Race Walking coach, Brent Vallance, has concentrated on promising walkers in their early twenties and this is reaping rewards. The success of Jared Tallent is evidence of the success of this strategy. The AIS has had a number of coaches who have made significant contributions to Australian race walking such as Simon Baker and Craig Hilliard but perhaps no more than German born Ron Weigel. Weigel gave Australian a belief in themselves and a training regime that had not been undertaken previously in this country. The AIS continues to play a major role in the emergence of Australia as one of the best walking nations in the world.
- 5. Judges:** Not often heralded as a contributing success factor race walking judges in Australia have, over the last 30 or so years, become more professional, more uniform in the interpretation of the rules and fairer in their application. Australian judges have been acknowledged internationally and have judged at Olympics, Commonwealth Games, World Championships and World Race Walking Cups. Several have been appointed Chief Judges at these events.

But good judging is not attributed only to those international judges but also to most Athletics Australia graded judges. Whereas we may argue that there is currently a propensity to judge knees far more readily than loss of contact, race walk judging in Australia is undoubtedly amongst the best in the world.

6. **Selectors:** Whereas there is little doubt that the selectors have been more prepared in recent years to send full squads to major events such as Olympics, World Race Walking Cup and Commonwealth Games one cannot be sure whether this is a cause or effect of Australia's race walking success internationally. Nevertheless it is largely the policy of the selectors and Athletics Australia to send full teams when athletes have met the qualifying standards.
7. **Little Athletics:** Much as we may like to criticise Australian Little Athletics and their sometimes lack of commitment to race walking it is abundantly clear that without Little Athletics, Australia would not have race walkers of the calibre it has. I am not sure whether there are any of our current elite walkers that did not participate in Little Athletics.
8. **Race Walking Australia:** For fifty years the Australian Federation of Race Walking Clubs has conducted race walking events but none more important than the Federation Race Walking Carnival on the long weekend in June. This event is the best attended race walking event on the Australian race walking calendar. It is without doubt the major walking activity of the year in Australia. The work of Peter Waddell and Robin Whyte and the ACT Race Walking Club should be acknowledged. Most, if not all, of our walking heroes have competed and won at this event.

So if the above are our influences do we actually have a model? Perhaps some would say that other track and field disciplines have similar structures. If so what makes race walking different? It is my belief that it is our race walking heritage coupled with a race walking family that, despite the critics and occasionally the internal challenges, has always remained strong. Supported for decades by people such as the Alf and Mabel Robinson, Peter Waddell, Robin White, Jill Huxley, Ron Crawford, Ray Smith, Bert and Bob Gardiner, Harry Summers, Dave Smith, Anne Saville, Kevin Stone, Simon Baker and Tim Erickson along with others that I have failed to mention will keep race walking at the forefront of Australian athletics.

So what do I think makes race walking strong? Treat all who participate as members of a family and provide support to all irrespective of their level of achievement.

Bob Cruise
Sept. 2009

Thanks Bob. Reading this, I can but agree. However, I would probably put the AIS contribution as the most significant factor in the past 30 years. Since it opened in 1981, it has always had one or more walks coaches and a whole swag of walkers on scholarship. Consider the current scholarship holders – Nathan Deakes, Luke Adams, Jared Tallent, Adam Rutter, Chris Erickson, Kellie Wapshott and Claire Tallent. Nowadays, you have to be a professional athlete to compete year after year at the world level and the only real way to do this is via an AIS scholarship. Such things did not exist in my day – thank goodness they now do. I have no hesitation in saying that without the AIS at the peak of the pyramid, we would not be competitive on the world stage.

Tim Erickson
23 September 2009

Stu Cooper emailed me with some further comments, prompted by Bob Cruise's thought provoking article on the success of Australian racewalking. Thanks Stu...very apt.

It was interesting in the previous issue to see Bob Cruise's response to Tim O'Shaughnessy's inquiry re walking's success. I think he covered the reasons pretty comprehensively. Yes, the AIS has been a huge factor - without it we'd probably have no world-class performers and may even be going backwards. I think his point about the sport's family quality is also very valid; in fact I'd take it a step further. I feel that family aspect is at least partly due to the fact that race walking stands alone amongst athletics sports as one that has had to fight virtually every day of its life for acceptance as a legitimate sporting pursuit. The attacks upon it rarely cease, and the achievements of its practitioners are either ignored or accepted grudgingly at best by the media, Barry Beergut, and even many other athletes - not to mention anyone who can aim a movie camera, freeze frames and squeal that as far as obeying the rules is concerned, the Emperor's wearing no clothes.

We who race walk for the love of it, the companionship and genuine fitness it affords (yes, and wrestle with the contentious elements of its rule enforcement), are probably drawn together in a kind of tribal solidarity. We keep putting the wagons in a circle and fending off the never-ending attacks from the Pig-Ignor-Indians. Within that

circle we keep doing what we do best with our racing, coaching and judging programs, while sending out skirmish parties comprising the likes of Sawall, Cook, Pierson, Baker, Saxby-Junna, A'Hern, Harvey, Tallent, Adams, Deakes and Saville who land blows on the world stage that few other Aussie athletes can emulate (not consistently, anyway), drawing usually muted kudos and, paradoxically, even more bone-headed attacks (as Nathan Deakes would testify.) This has to have bred a certain toughness amongst us, the kind of spirit that helps us bond with each other competitively and socially with a kind of frontier resolve, regardless of standard attained. Whilst doing so, it's fortuitous that we are able to face the taunters and denigrators with just four words, perhaps more in keeping with their own sporting tastes: 'Look at the scoreboard.'

Tim Erickson
7 October 2009