

## AIS WALKER TAKES LONG STRIDES TO OLYMPICS

The Canberra Times newspaper is a good one for the occasional racewalking article and last week saw a great one on our new Olympic walker Beki Lee, written by staff writer David Polinghome (Tues 26 April 2012). You can read the article for yourself at <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/sport/olympics-2012/ais-walker-takes-long-strides-to-olympics-20120425-1xlv2.html>



**20km Race Walker Beki Lee at the AIS Athletics Track before training last week. Photo: Jeffrey Chan**

Dreads, tattoos, piercings and free spirits would have to be some of the least used words in race walking. Normally the sport is associated with a nerdy image and draws comparisons to John Cleese's Ministry of Silly Walks. But that might have to change after the emergence of Beki Lee onto the international scene.

The 25-year-old is off to the London Olympics later this year in Australia's team of three, along with Claire Tallent and Regan Lamble. After showing promise as a junior - Lee represented Australia at the 2003 world youth championships in Canada, where she finished 11th - she didn't make another representative team until last year's world university games in China. A self-proclaimed free spirit, Lee hadn't shown the total commitment needed to compete on the international stage until two years ago.

Realising time was catching up with her, she sold her beloved Land Rover 4WD so she could afford to move to Canberra and train with the AIS squad under Brent Vallance. With no scholarship as support, she worked part-time in the AIS souvenir shop along with other casual jobs to make ends meet. It's allowed her to tap into the AIS and Vallance's expertise to try and take her walking to the next level. The Australian College of Physical Education student also switched to studying sports business by correspondence.

Adding further colour to her character, Lee's parents look after seven foster children and she credits their support for giving her the courage to make the move up the Hume Highway from Sydney - she knows she'll always have a place to stay if things don't work out in the ACT, albeit a crowded one.

Lee had a light-bulb moment two years ago and realised if she was going to have a crack at the Olympics, she'd better get a move on. "I'm a bit of a free spirit, I guess. I tend to find it hard to focus and concentrate at one thing for a long time, so I guess this is a bit of a challenge, but it seems to be working for me," Lee said.

With a limited training base to build on, Lee was realistic about London. A top-16 finish and beating her personal best of one hour 33 minutes and nine seconds is all she's hoping for, before a push for the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Games. "It's probably going to be a little bit daunting [at London] just because it is the first [Olympics] but I'll just try and enjoy the experience as much as possible and not get too overwhelmed by it," Lee said. "Hopefully the next Olympics will be the one where we can actually walk a little bit more competitively and see how we go."

Vallance agreed with her expectations for London but said there was no doubting the walker's talent. "She did knock 10 minutes off her 20k time in 12 months. It just means she's always been reasonably talented, she just needed a bit of direction and a bit of structure around her and that's obviously helped her enormously," he said.

Lee is currently training for next month's world race walking cup in Saransk, Russia, and is in the middle of a four-week stint in the AIS's altitude house. She has to spend at least 12-14 hours in the house to get maximum benefits. "It gets a little bit boring at times just because there's a lot of laying around, you're kind of outside your normal life a little bit," Lee explained. "We've been in there a few times. Normally it knocks me around and I get super tired but this time hasn't been too bad, so I think my body is finally adjusting to it and starting to get used to the effects of altitude."