

BRENT VALLANCE

1995	Race Walking World Cup	Beijing	20 km Walk	81/124	1:34:44
1997	Race Walking World Cup	Prague	20 km Walk	68/140	1:25:23
1997	Universiade	Catania	20 km Walk	9/14	1:32:27
1998	Commonwealth Games	Kuala Lumpur	20 km Walk	14/17	1:36:29

Brent Vallance was born 30 April 1972 in the outer Perth suburb of Armadale. After their family was evacuated from Darwin in the aftermath of Cyclone Tracy¹, his father joined the Royal Australian Air Force, with an initial posting to Canberra. It was there that he was first exposed to racewalking, watching his uncle Robin Whyte competing at the ANU oval in 1976. It was also there that Brent started Little Athletics in 1977, at Corroboree Little Athletics Centre at Dickson.

The family again lived in Darwin from 1978 to 1982 where he again did Little Athletics. In 1983 the family moved to Sydney and his racewalking became more serious. He competed in the 1983 and 1984 LBG carnivals (1983 - 8th in U12 2km in 12:00, 1984 - 11th in U15 2km with 11:16), representing the ACT even though he was living in NSW.

From then on, his career blossomed as part of the strong Yvonne Melene Sydney based training squad in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Possessed of great speed, he was one of the many track specialists zooming around the interclub tracks in Sydney during the early nineties.

His big breakthrough came in 1994/1995. By way of illustration, the AA yearly rankings for the year ending 30 June 1995 showed him first over 3000m (11:52.2), third over 5000m (20:22.1), fourth over 10000m (43:45.0) and tenth over 20km (1:31:04). He also placed third in the National 5000m championship in March behind Nick A'Hern and Dion Russell with a time of 20:40.5.

On the basis of these fine performances, he was selected to represent Australia in the 1995 World Racewalking Cup in Beijing, coming 81st in a time of 1:34:44. That same year, he walked his first LBG 20 miler in Canberra, taking fourth place in an impressive first up time of 2:38:47.

1996 saw big improvements in times. In March he took bronze in the Australian 20km championship behind Nick A'Hern and Dion Russell, his time a big PB 1:26:50, and two days later he was second to Nick in the National 5000m with a time of 19:30.63. The AA yearly rankings to 31 March 1996 showed him first over 3000m (11:33.0), second over 5000m (19:30.63), third over 10,000m (42:39.0) and third over 20km (1:26:50). Two months later in Eisenhuettenstadt, Germany, he improved to 1:25:02 (it was in this same race that Dion Russell qualified for the 1996 Olympics).



Brent races to second place in a PB time of 19:30.63 in the 1996 Australian 5000m championship

¹ The northern Australian city of Darwin was devastated early on Christmas morning 1974 when hit by the tropical weather depression that was given the name Cyclone Tracy. As the eye of the cyclone passed over the city between midnight and 7.00 am on Christmas morning torrential rain fell and the winds were officially recorded at 217 kilometres per hour prior to the Bureau of Meteorology anemometer being destroyed. Houses and other buildings disintegrated under the onslaught, accompanied by the sounds of flying debris and breaking glass. With the cyclone's passing 65 people were killed (including 16 lost at sea) and many more were injured, 70 per cent of Darwin's homes were destroyed or suffered severe damage, and all public services – communications, power, water and sewerage – were severed.

1997 saw Brent continue to improve, setting a new 5000m PB (19:28.68 - Hobart, Feb) and representing Australia twice, firstly in the 1997 World Racewalking Cup when he finished 68th in the 20km with 1:25:23 and secondly in the 1997 World University Games when he finished 9th with 1:32:27.0.

1997 saw walkers start to focus their attention on the upcoming Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur. The 30 km event for men had been replaced by the two international distances of 20 km and 50 km. So now the Commonwealth Games matched the Olympics with three walks on offer.

Brent fronted for his first ever 50km in December 1997 in Melbourne in the official trial but is recorded as one of 5 DNFs, the placings and Games spots going to Dion Russell, Duane Cousins and Dominic McGrath.

The men's 20 km trial was held in conjunction with the Australian Championships in Melbourne in March, the race held on a 2 km circuit around Princes Park with the start/finish alongside the Optus Oval stadium. Nick A'Hern was an easy winner in 1:22:07 – no issues there! The real turmoil was a couple of minutes further back in the field - Nathan Deakes crossed the finishing line in second place in around 84 minutes, only to discover that he had picked up a third report late in the race and had been disqualified. The minor places were subsequently taken by Dion Russell (1:27:02) and Duane Cousins (1:28:23) with Brent in fourth (1:32:56) but the times were not good enough to guarantee selection (the A standard was set at 1:23:30 and the B standard at 1:26:00).

With only one team spot clearly clearly filled, the race was on to clinch the second and third positions. Brent joined the AIS team going to Europe to race the European summer. This was his last chance to get the points on the scoreboard and he had to self-fund his trip. On May 23rd in Naumburg, Nathan recorded an A qualifying time of 1:23:24 and Brent recorded 1:24:34 for a B qualifier. Nathan's spot now looked confirmed but had Brent done enough to secure the final berth? Apart from his one failure at the National titles in March, Brent had raced well. He had recorded 1:25:01 at the Adelaide GP on 26/01/98, 1:24:34 in Naumburg on 23/05/98 and won the Second Federation event in Geelong in 1:24:37 on 02/08/98.



Brent is congratulated by AIS walks coach Ron Weigel after his 1:24:34 in Naumburg in May 1998

The selectors obviously had him in mind for the final spot and, when Nick and Nathan were asked to participate in a pre-departure 10 km trial in August, Brent was called by Ron Weigel two days before the event and told he was also expected to walk. Selector Brian Rowe had rung Ron to inform him it would be a three man pre-departure trial. The times of the three walkers were Nick 39:20 , Nathan 40:14 and Brent 41:43 . The selectors decided that Brent had done enough and all three were finally confirmed to contest the 20 km in Kuala Lumpur.

After all his efforts to make the team, Brent had a shocker and walked what he subsequently described as the worst race of his life. It just goes to show that even with the best preparations, things can still go wrong on the day. He faded in the sweltering conditions to finish 14th with 1:36:29 .

A few months later, he fronted for the LBG 20 mile class in Canberra and was fifth in the highest quality ever scheduling of that race. Consider the times - Craig Barrett (NZ) 2:19:37, Nathan Deakes 2:21:50, Dion Russell 2:26:14, Duane Cousins 2:28:47 and Brent Vallance 2:30:12. An 8 minute PB and one of the fastest times ever and all he could take home was fifth place. It was indeed a time of great depth in Australian racewalking.

Brent discussed these formative years with me some time ago

I wasn't on scholarship in 1998 when I toured with the AIS athletes. I had to fork out about 1500DM at the airport to Ronnie for my accommodation and meal costs - I was the only one paying out of my own pocket. That's why I love to see someone outside the AIS program keeping them honest. That was my job in the 96-98 period, and I reckon we need more of it. I had PBs of 11:29/19:28/41:06/1:24:34 before I got a scholarship in 1999 - and lost it when I was injured after 9 months. I raced only once in an AIS uniform, and was having surgery four weeks after that.

Yes, what should have been the best of times turned sour very quickly as Brent, less than one year into his AIS scholarship, badly tore his hamstring, had to opt for an operation to reattach it to the bone, and then endured a long rehabilitation. He briefly returned but found that, once he applied the pressure, the hamstring issue was still there.

At that stage, as others were preparing for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney, he was forced to retire. His PBs, as per the AA ranking lists, still read very impressively

3000m	11:29.7	Sydney	06/12/1997
5000m	19:20.87	Sydney	20/02/2000
10km	41.38	Canberra	08/02/1998
20km	1:24.34.0	Naumburg, Germany	23/05/1998
30km	2:17:45	Canberra	07/06/1998
20 Mile	2:30:12	Canberra	07/06/1998

Luckily for us, Brent was not lost to the sport and, when the opportunity was presented, he applied for and took up a position as AIS Scholarship Coach - Racewalking. He worked in this capacity until 2005, taking on Nathan Deakes, Jared Tallent, Michael McCagh and Adam Rutter amongst others. It was under his guidance that Nathan won his bronze medal in the 2004 Olympic 20km final in Athens. Brent was the official Olympics Team Coach for racewalking on that trip.

Since 2006 he has been the AIS Chief Coach - Racewalking and has taken the Australian walks program to new heights. Taking teams overseas every year, organizing January training camps at the AIS or in Thredbo, taking on the additional role of AA Development Coordinator for the walking program or simply inviting our up and coming walkers to come to Canberra for a weekend or a week to train with 'the big boys', his enthusiasm and commitment never cease to amaze me. He is highly sought after, both locally and overseas, as a presenter. And of course, he continues to coach our elite scholarship walkers in Jared and Claire Tallent, Chris Erickson, Regan Lamble, Beki Lee, Rachel Tallent and Blake Steele.



A familiar role as Brent looks after Jared Tallent (2009) and Regan Lamble (2012)

His contribution was fittingly acknowledged in 2008 when he was recognized as Athletics Australia Coach of the Year. He also won this award again in 2010, in light of the ongoing success of Australian walkers internationally.



Brent in presenter mode - January 2011 at an Australian Junior Walks camp at the AIS

As Brent now relinquishes his mantle as AIS Chief Coach - Racewalking, we wish him all the best in the next phase of his endeavours.

Tim Erickson
Tuesday 23 October 2012