

CLAIRE TALLENT

Claire Tallent (nee Woods) built up an impressive set of international representations over the 9 years from 2004 to 2012 – 4 World Cups, 2 Olympic Games, 2 IAAF World Championships, 1 World University Games and 1 Commonwealth Games. But her best was yet to come, as she returned with a vengeance in 2017, only months after the birth of her son Harvey. First to the bare bones of her international career.

2004	IAAF World Walking Cup	Naumburg	20km Walk	42 nd	1:35:25
2007	World Uni Championships	Bangkok	20km Walk	14 th	1:45:07
2008	IAAF World Walking Cup	Cheboksary	20km walk	31 st	1:35:01
2008	Olympic Games	Beijing	20km walk	28 th	1:33:02
2009	IAAF World Championships	Berlin	20km Walk	27 th	1:38:12
2010	IAAF World Walking Cup	Chihuahua	20km walk	19 th	1:39:08
2010	Commonwealth Games	Delhi	20km walk	2 nd	1:36:55
2011	IAAF World Championships	Daegu	20km walk	21 st	1:34:46
2012	IAAF World Walking Cup	Saransk	20km walk	DQ	
2012	Olympic Games	London	20km walk	DQ	
2017	IAAF World Championships	London	20km Walk	43 rd	1:37:05
2018	Commonwealth Games	Gold Coast	20km Walk	DQ	
2018	IAAF World Walking Cup	Taicang	50km Walk	3 rd	4:09:33

And now onto an indepth review of Claire's career. First some stats – Claire Woods was born 6th July 1981 in Adelaide. 1981 was obviously a good year for walking as that year also saw the births of fellow Aussie representatives Kellie Wapshott, Troy Sundstrom and Chris Erickson.

Claire's sporting career started in little Athletics which she took up at 11 years of age, initially focusing on the middle distance events. Once started, she progressed quickly and, within a year, she had qualified for the State Finals in the walk as well as the distance events and managed to pick up a bronze medal.

I only ever won one medal at LA - as you can see by the photo, I was a fair bit smaller than the other girls at the same age. John Pearce always told me that I'd be a late developer.



Claire on the right – SA Little Athletics podium finisher

A year later, she joined John Pearce's Enfield Harriers training squad.

At that time I was running twice a week and still competing in LA's. After running for Enfield Harriers throughout the season, it came to interclub finals, and as I had done little athletics I was required to do the walk. I don't remember what I walked, but it must have been ok. Fortunately for me Winter Nationals were in Adelaide in 1995, and after my walk at interclub finals, Roy McFadden asked me if I would like to come out to Walkers Club and try to qualify to make the SA team. I think I walked around 30 mins for my first attempt at 5km and made my first South Australian team. I competed at Nationals that year, coming around 17th or third to last, but I was excited to be in the South Australian team. From there, I made my first All Schools team at the end of 1995 and came well back in the field. I never raced at any more State individual championships for LA's as they

*always coincided with National championships. Training two nights a week, my breakthrough year came in 1996 where I collected my first national medal, finishing third behind Renee McGaskill and Alanna McIlvennie and ahead of Kellie Wapshott (in 4th) in the U16 5 km walk at the Australian roadwalking championships at Albert Park in a time of **25:30**, I beat my more fancied South Australian team mates to pick up the team silver medal. That year I also made the state cross country team, and continued to do so for the remaining two years of school."*

From then on, she was rarely defeated in South Australian events and, in 1998, won her first national title in the Australian U18 8 km roadwalk (**42:41**). She followed this up in 1999 with 2nd behind Kellie Wapshott in the U20 10 km roadwalk championship (**52:40**). She also did well on the track, winning silver and bronze at the 1997 All Schools championships in Hobart and bronze in the 1998 All Schools championships in Canberra. In October 1998, she also represented Australia at the World School Games in Shanghai alongside fellow walkers Erica McGinniskin, Daniel Vellis and Douglas Connolly, finishing 9th in her event.

Thus she finished her final year of school as one of our top female juniors but, like so many promising walkers of that age, she did not kick on as expected. She walked for another year or so before giving the sport away in early 2000.

I did the U20 track nationals in Sydney in 2000 and when I was warming down with Sara Tomlin I decided to pull the pin on walking. I had just started my second year of university, was working part-time and going out often. I played lots of sports throughout this period: beach volleyball, touch football, women's Aussie Rules (dual premiers!), church netball, I rode my bike to and from uni, would go for runs and would go to the gym.

In mid 2001 her competitive nature got the better of her and she decided to take up walking again. She competed at walkers club, and two weeks later found herself "making up the women's team" at the LBG walking carnival in Canberra. There she finished 5th in the Open Women's 5000m walk in **26:05** and was the first South Australian to finish.

She continued to train three times a week at Enfield Harriers and, in late 2001, was asked if she would like to consider applying for an AIS developmental scholarship. At the end of 2001 she completed her degree in Human Movement and moved to Canberra to live with her aunt and begin training with the AIS squad. This was obviously a huge change, although AIS coach Ron Weigel had provided her with a training program for around 8 weeks before relocating.

On 4th January 2002, she commenced her AIS scholarship, moving into residence along with Cheryl Webb and starting on no less than 175 km for the first week of January. The next four weeks were all around this mark, somewhere between 175-185 km per week. As a result of this training she improved very quickly. At 20 years of age, and after only 6 weeks on scholarship, she recorded a PB of **46.46** for the 10000m track walk at the Canberra A Series meet. She followed this up with **47:59** in the Hobart Grand Prix 10000m track walk a few weeks later. Unfortunately the high volume of training came at a cost – she developed tendonitis in her foot and could only struggle to 5th place in the Australian 20 km roadwalking championship in April in Brisbane, her time a relatively slow **1:43:56**.

Later that year, the AIS squad travelled to Mexico for a block of altitude training. After returning home and just turning 21, she walked **1:37:13** at a race in Melbourne in cold and wet conditions. This time qualified her for the 2002 World Racewalking Cup in Italy later that year, but Athletics Australia subsequently denied the inclusion of her, Cheryl Webb and Natalie Saville in the team, opting to take Jane Saville as the only female walker. That is one selection decision that I have never been able to fathom.

After Ron Weigel left the AIS toward the end of 2002, the AIS walks squad was left without a coach and was supported primarily by athletics administrator Louise Mogg and by Robbie Bolton before Canadian based coach John Fitzgerald was finally appointed. This was a tumultuous period for Claire where she suffered from an esophageal ulcer and poor form. It was some time before she finally turned things around. She was selected in the 2003 World University Games team but never made it to Korea. *Throughout this time, you could say that I was very young and "lost".*

At the end of 2003, Tudor Bidder came in as the new head coach of the AIS program and she was asked to resign her scholarship. This she duly did and in 2004 she struggled along, working part-time around the AIS and trying to survive. When Brent Vallance eventually took up the scholarship coaching position, she began to focus once again on making a World Racewalking Cup team. In a nail biting finish, she took 5th at the 2004 National 20 km championship in **1:38:25**, five seconds under the WWC qualifying standard. Claire had made her first Australian senior team. At the WWC in Naumburg, she finished 42nd in a breakthrough PB of **1:35:25**.

2005 was a quiet year in which Claire competed infrequently. She did win the NSW 20 km roadwalking title at Chipping Norton in 1:36, a time which qualified her for the next World University Games. But once again, she did not compete. Her partner, Jared Tallent, had made his first World Championships and she had already booked her flights to watch him compete. Back from Europe, she contested the Australian 10 km roadwalking championship in Adelaide in late August, coming 3rd in **48:54**.



The placegetters in the 2005 Australian 10 km roadwalking championships – all 3 girls represented at the 2008 World Cup – Kellie Wapshott and Claire as walkers and Simone Wolowiec as team masseur and assistant manager

Although she competed sparingly, she did train well that winter with a view to the 2006 World Racewalking Cup. Alas, this wasn't to be. In the Sydney trial race, she was in contention for a spot until the final lap when Kellie Wapshott passed her. This meant the vital last spot in the team was awarded to Kellie rather than Claire. Claire had walked **1:37:42**, a good time but just not quite good enough. Two weeks later, she walked what would have been a South Australian State record in the Victorian 5000m track championship at the MCG, crossing the line in 2nd place behind Natalie Saville and stopping the clock at 22.01, only to be surprisingly disqualified after the event.



Kellie Wapshott chases Claire in the 2006 AV 5000m race at the MCG

She was totally devastated by the events of the two previous weeks yet it says a lot for her that she still headed to China to compete in the World Walking Challenge where she powered through the first 10 km in a PB time of **46:10** before fading slightly to finish the 20 km event in a PB time of **1:35:18**.

With that race, her fortunes turned. In January 2007, she walked **1:35:36** at the Canberra A Series meet, then subsequently won her first Australian Open title in March in Brisbane in extreme heat, with **1:41:56**. She finally made her debut at the 2007 World University Games in August where she finished 14th in stifling conditions.

The AIS program was quite different back then. I was not on any scholarship. At that time, non-AIS athletes were not able to access any of the facilities. I was not able to use the heat tent or altitude house. Combined with working full time in the public service, I went to Bangkok not really prepared for the heat.

In December of 2007 she recorded **1:36:39** in winning a 20 km test race in Melbourne. After participating in an AIS altitude study in January 2008, she relocated to Adelaide for work and subsequently won the South Australian 5000m title in a PB time of **21:57**. Her next walk was in the National 20 km roadwalking championship in Melbourne in early March and it was a huge walk. A second place finish to Kellie Wapshott and a whopping PB time of **1:33:02** saw her named in the 2008 Australian World Racewalking Cup team and in the 2008 Australian Olympic team.

At the end of 2007, I got a job in the commonwealth public service back in my home town of Adelaide. This could very well have been where my walking career would end. As newly engaged, I had got my job back in Adelaide to move back to my family, save some money and make a life for Jared and me. The plan was that Jared would come and live with me once Beijing was over. Coaching myself by this time, doing more speed work and doing track PBs (21.56), I unexpectedly made the Olympic team in 2008. This was what I consider the start of my real international walking career.



A fit and fast Claire Woods in action in 2008

After gaining Olympic selection, she was finally offered a return AIS scholarship, working with Brent Vallance, Six weeks after moving to Adelaide to start her "new life" she relocated back to Canberra with a work transfer, dropped down to part-time and started her career anew. In early 2012, she was able to look back on this critical move as pivotal:

Since then, I haven't looked back - I have learnt how I need to train, what works for me and done lots of very specific preparation for various events, working out what works for me in terms of heat, altitude, sessions etc.

2008 was indeed a good year with 31st in the World Walking Cup in Russia (**1:35:01**) and 28th in the Olympics (**1:33:02**). It then reached its high point when she and Jared were married in the appropriately named Adelaide suburb of Walkerville, soon after they returned from Beijing. Claire Woods was now Claire Tallent.



Claire and Jared marry in the appropriately named Adelaide suburb of Walkerville in late 2012

Over the next few years, Claire was in every Australian team and always gave it everything. Representations included

2009	IAAF World Championships	Berlin	20km Walk	27 th	1:38:12
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Claire's walk in Delhi in October 2010 deserves special mention as her second place finish saw her earn her first major international medal. In her Commonwealth Games debut, she had led early on with English walker Jo Jackson and Kenyan walker Grace Wanjiru, While Jackson eventually broke clear to take gold, Claire wore the Kenyan down in the hot and humid conditions to win silver with 1:36:55. It was a typically gutsy walk. With the men's walk starting at 6:30AM, and with the women's walk starting at 6:45AM, Claire was able to see Jared take gold as she walked to silver.

"It's my first Commonwealth Games and my goal with Jared coming in was to both get on the podium and share it together. Jared gave me a good 'come on' when he went past and it's great to have him out there cheering me on."

It was a great day for the Tallent family and Australian race walking. *"I'm so proud of Claire, we train together every day, we work so hard, she helps me so much and I try to help her as much as I can. It's just amazing to be out there and cheer her on and see her get a silver medal,"* Jared said.



Claire and Jared – silver and gold in the Commonwealth Games in Delhi in 2010

On the Australian front, she was now firmly ensconced in the Number One position with wins in successive Australian 20km championships in Hobart (2010 – **1:32:40**, 2011 – **1:33:38**, 2012 – **1:32:58**). She and Jared regularly travelled to the various IAAF Challenge Series events, savouring life as an athletic couple. With Jared's sister eventually Rachel joining them on tour, it was indeed a strong family group representing us internationally.



Rachel, Jared and Claire in Hobart in February 2011

But it was a different Claire who toed the line in 2012, shedding weight off her already slight frame as her training and her focus intensified even further. Her win the 2012 National 20km championship in Hobart in 38°C temperatures was unbelievable, her time of **1:32:58** the only A qualifier on the day. She followed this up with a fighting second place a week later in Chihuahua (**1:33:21** at altitude in Mexico).

Four weeks later, in an IAAF Challenge event in Taicang, China, she upped the ante further with a superb 5th placed time of **1:28:53**. After a 10km split of 44:35, she had stormed home with a second half split of 44:18 to move to the number two spot on the Australian all-time ranking list, second only to Jane Saville. Coincidentally, Jared had also finished 5th in his race, with a time of 1:20:34.



A fine double by Claire and Jared in Taicang in March 2012

Claire's success was well deserved. Her career had had more than its fair share of low points yet, on every occasion, she had come back stronger and more determined. She trained hard and raced hard and sat atop the ranks of our best ever women walkers.

Her PBs at that stage indicated the quality of her walking

20 km	1:28:53	IAAF Challenge Event	China	March 2012
10 km	44:11	IAAF Challenge Event	China	March 2012
5000m	21:29	Sydney Track Classic	Sydney	Feb 2012
3000m	12:48	A.A. A Series Meet	Brisbane	Feb 2009

My question to Claire at the time: You are walking better than ever so what do you put that down to - just more training or a combination of factors?

Accumulation of many hard years of training, fear of not making the Olympics, determination to be better than before, meticulous planning in terms of race preparation, key sessions, pre-race and race nutrition, losing 5kg, working more closely with the support staff at the AIS, awesome training squad with great talent, depth and humour.

Alas, things from then on did not go according to plan. First to the IAAF Race Walking World Cup which was held in mid May in Saransk, Russia. Claire started aggressively, the only foreigner to challenge the Russian juggernaut (since discredited as drugs cheats). At the 5km mark, it was a group of 6 – Claire alongside 5 Russians and making the pace. By the 10km mark, passed in 44:33, Claire was still part of what was now a group of 4 and still walking an inspired race. There was great disappointment in the Australian camp when she was disqualified just before the 14km mark when holding 4th spot and well clear of any chasers.

She seemed untroubled by the judges in her next few walks, taking third in the Sesto San Giovanni classic in Italy in June (1:32:30) and winning the Oceania Championships 5000m (21:47) and 10km (44:19) 2 weeks later in Cairns. But come the 2012 Olympics in London, tragedy struck again. Claire was sitting in a group of 3 walkers occupying positions 8-10 when she was disqualified at the 13km mark. She had powered through the 10km mark in a 36 sec PB time of **43:43** and looked on target for somewhere around 1:28:00. 2012 been a huge breakthrough for her as she had pushed herself into the top echelon of walkers. Only the judges stood in her way.

Shattered, she returned to Australia, not sure what to do. A last minute decision saw her enter and win the 2012 Australian Roadwalk Championship in Adelaide in late August (**1:31:12**). She then travelled to Erdos in China in mid September, finishing 7th in the IAAF Challenge Series Final 10km (**45:29**).

But her heart was no longer in it and, perhaps unsurprisingly, she announced her retirement from international competition soon afterwards.

Due to the strange rules surrounding an official retirement from competition, she was forced to take 12 months completely away from the sport. So it was not until November 2013 that she returned to do the occasional local South Australian race, obviously more from a fitness perspective rather than with any thought of kick starting anything more serious.

Overall, her appearances were few and far between, as she seemed content to support Jared in his bid for the 2016 Olympics (she was now officially his coach) and work full time as the main bread winner.

Fast forward to Saturday 23rd April 2016, to the IAAF Challenge Series meet in Taicang, China, where Claire toed the line for her first major race in well over 3 years. Amazingly, she was with the leaders throughout the race and crossed the line in third place in a time round 1:32:30, only to find out she had received a third red card late in proceedings. She had been doing lots of training with husband Jared as he prepared for the Rio Olympics and obviously felt fit enough to have a tilt.

She had left her Olympic run too late but it was still an impressive return. The following month, she finished 2nd in the international racewalking meet in Naumburg (**1:33:23**) and a week later was 5th in La Coruna (**1:35:36**). She was back!

She travelled to Rio with Jared, watching him walk to second in the Olympic 50km. Then came the announcement that they were expecting their first child. Any thoughts of a walking comeback now went onto hold as the happy couple prepared for the big event.

Harvey Sebastian Tallent was born on Thursday 25th May 2017 in Adelaide, weighing in at 2.660kg.



Claire and Jared welcome Harvey Sebastian Tallent, born 25th May 2017

In mid July, Athletics Australia announced that Claire had been added to the women's 20km team to contest the 2017 IAAF World Championships in London, replacing the injured Rachel Tallent. It was a big gamble, given that Claire had not raced in over 12 months, and given that she had just given birth.

Now this is a footnote for all new mothers wondering if they should get back into sport. Less than three months after giving birth to her first child, a delighted Claire was out on The Mall in London, recording **1:37:05** for 43rd place in the World Championships. At the finish, she went over to Jared who had been forced out of these Championships with a hamstring injury, and collected baby Harvey to show off to the TV cameras and spectators on the course. It seems there are other prizes worth having besides medals and money.



Claire celebrates after her London walk in 2017

Claire's career had now been kickstarted, but she had many things to juggle, including work and coaching (Jared was still training) and a new baby. But it was worth it, as 2018 saw the Commonwealth Games returning to Australia, along with a new door opening, after the women's 50km had finally been approved as an international event.

She knuckled down to training and the speed soon returned. She finished third in the Fawkner Park 20km race in December (**1:33:59**), 3rd in the Australian 10,000m Track Championship in January (**46:06.59**) and 3rd in the Australian 20km Summer Championship in Adelaide in February (**1:31:29**).

Fast forward to Sunday 8th April 2018 and the Commonwealth Games 20km on the Gold Coast in Queensland. Claire had come second in Delhi in 2010 so was keen to go one better on this occasion. The race, contested in hot and humid

conditions, quickly became a race between two, as Jemima Montag and Claire had cleared out from the rest of the field by mid race. By 12km, Jemima had opened a gap of 2 seconds to Claire. The lead had extended to 6 seconds by the 14km mark and she looked set for gold. Alas, her pace started to slow around the 16km mark, allowing Claire to slowly bridge the gap. They passed the 17km mark together, then it was Claire who took the initiative, working to a lead of around 15m at the 18km mark. She looked set for gold! But disaster struck as she passed the start/finish line, with the chief judge showing her the red paddle, confirming that she has picked up a third red. She had given her all in the quest for gold, only to have it snatched from her in the final stages.

Fast forward another 4 weeks to the IAAF World Team Championships in Taicang and the inaugural women's 50km championship, in which Claire was one of 32 entrants. As expected, she was in the mix right from the start, part of a six-woman leading pack. As the race progressed, the pack dwindled and it eventually came down to a four way battle between Claire and three Chinese walkers. When eventual winner Rui Liang broke away, the group quickly fragmented and it looked over, with Claire relegated to fourth place. But in a classic twist, second placed Maocuo Li imploded in the final 2km, slowing to a street walk. Claire caught and passed her, clinching third spot. Not content with that, she continued to dig deep in an effort to catch Hang Yin and snatch the silver. It was not to be, as she fell short by 24 seconds.

Her bronze medal time of **4:09:33** was the fourth-fastest performance in the event's brief history and earned her new Australian, Oceania and Commonwealth records into the bargain. After her disappointment in the Commonwealth Games 20km walk, it was the best possible antidote.

On what was a memorable day for the Tallent family, Jared also attended the medals ceremony to receive gold medals from the 2012 and 2016 IAAF World Race Walking Team Championships 50km race walks. This followed the recently confirmed positive doping test of the 2016 winner Alex Schwazer (ITA) and a previously confirmed series of abnormalities in the Athlete Biological Passport profile of 2012 winner Sergey Kiryapkin (RUS) and second-placed Igor Erokhin (RUS). Justice had finally been served!



*Left: Claire walks to bronze in the inaugural women's 50km in Taicang
Right: Jared and Claire display their medals in Taicang 2018*

After a long and stellar racewalking career which includes a 20km PB of 1:28:53 and a Commonwealth Games silver medal (2010), Claire has now added a new string to her bow. At 37 years of age, thoughts of retirement might have been on her mind but I am sure that this superb walk will make her think twice about that. Perhaps Tokyo now beckons, with the women's 50km to be hopefully added to the program.

Tim Erickson
12 July 2018