

DANE BIRD-SMITH

2009 World Youth Championships	10,000m Walk	8/30	43:53.62
2010 World Junior	10,000m Walk	5/24	41:32.36
2010 Race Walking World Cup	Junior 10km Walk	37/37	DQ
2011 World Mountain Running	Junior Mountain Run (8.77km)	15/67	39:52
2012 Race Walking World Cup	20km Walk	44/124	1:25:41
2013 World Championships	20km Walk	11/64	1:23:06
2014 Race Walking World Cup	20km Walk	14/113	1:20:27
2015 Universiade	20km Walk	1/26	1:21:30
2015 World Championships	20km Walk	8/61	1:21:37

Queenslander Dane Bird-Smith, born 15th July 1992, initially took up athletics with a focus on the 400m, only switching to racewalking as a teenager and coached by his father, former Australian international walker and record holder David Smith.

My first recorded championship race for him was in the U16 3km championship at the LBG Carnival in June 2006 when he finished 5th in **15:16** and was part of the QRWC team that took second in the associated teams race.

He next returned to the LBG carnival in 2008 when he easily won the U16 3km in **13:31**, beating Blake Steele and Brad Aiton. Later that year, he showcased his walking in the Pacific School Games in Canberra, winning the U17 5000m walk in **22:39.32** in windy and hot conditions. A week later he won the U20 10km invitational roadwalk at Fawkner Park in Melbourne in a PB **45:09**.



Dane wins the PSG U17 5000m in Canberra in December 2008

As 2009 started, 16 year old Dane continued his rapid improvement, winning the Australian Youth Olympics 5000m in January (**20:58**), then improving to **20:22** at the Australia Cup Grand Prix Meet in early February and then walking **20:55** in the Sydney Track Classic 5000m. He rounded off his summer season with a win in the Australian Junior 10,000m track walk at the Australian T&F Championships in March in a breakthrough time of **43:47.71**. This confirmed his selection for the 2009 World Youth Championships where he came a commendable 8th in **43:53.61**. Back in Australia, he won the U18 10km roadwalk in August with **44:07** and then the Australian All-Schools U18 5000m in December in **21:08.70**.

In 2010, he continued his assault on the local Australian underage scene, winning the World Racewalking Cup trial in Hobart in February with **43:17** and then repeating his win in the Australian Junior 10,000m track walk at the Australian T&F Championships with **43:16.93**, thus gaining selection for the 2010 World Racewalking Cup and the World Junior Championships. His World Cup walk in May was a disappointment with an unexpected DQ but he bounced back in the best possible way in July in the World Junior Championships with fifth place in the 10,000m in a big PB of **41:32.36**. Back in

Australia, he snared another win in the Australian U20 10km roadwalk championship in August with **43:00**.

Come the 2010/2011 summer, Dane, now 18 years old, was in superb form with a series of searing walks, the best being **5:23** for 1500m (Brisbane, 04/10/10), **11:27** for 3000m (Brisbane, 18/12/10) and **19:44** for 5000m (Brisbane, 05/02/11). He continued to chip away over the longer distances as well, winning the AA Invitational 10km roadwalk in Hobart in February in a PB **40:56** and the U20 10,000m walk at the Australian T&F Championships (his third win in a row) in a new Australian record of **41:02.18**. Alas, with no Australian roadwalking teams on offer for him in 2011, he showed his versatility with 15th place in the 2011 World Junior Mountain Run Championship which was being held in Queensland – he was in fact the first of the Australian Junior runners to finish the event. After his usual high quality winter, he finished off his Junior career with yet another win in the Australian U20 10km roadwalk championship in August (**43:57**) before travelling to Spain where he raced competitively against the stop senior walkers in the final of the IAAF Challenge Series, coming 13th in the 10km roadwalk in **41:21**.

It was now time for Dane to move up to 20km – he would be officially in the Open/U23 ranks in 2012. His 20km debut in December 2011 at Fawkner Park in Melbourne saw him finish 2nd in **1:26:38**. A week before the World Cup and Olympic 20km trial in Hobart in February 2012, Dane knocked out a superb 5000m PB of **19:02.59**, coming 3rd at the Sydney Track Classic. Alas, he could not reproduce that same form a week later in Hobart in horrendous conditions and a temperature nudging 40C, fading to 6th in the trial (4th Australian), his time of **1:28:12** a long way off the pace. Chasing an Olympic qualifier, he improved to **1:23:15** at the IAAF Challenge event in Taicang a month later but it was not enough to secure an Olympic berth and he had to be content with a second World Cup appearance. But he was, after all, still only 19 years of age!

His World Cup walk was a good one, coming 43rd in **1:24:41**. He also won his first Australian Open title that year when he won the 20km roadwalk championship in Adelaide in August with **1:23:28**. He finished off his winter with another appearance in the IAAF Challenge Series final in China a few weeks later, finishing 5th in **40:32**.

Dane continued his improvement into 2013, coming second to Jared Tallent in the Australian 20km summer roadwalk championship in Hobart (**1:22:27**) and winning a whole swag of 5000m walks, all in the low 19 minute range. A small European tour in the May/June period saw him take 3rd in Sesto San Giovanni in Italy (**1:23:18**) and 4th in La Coruna (**1:22:03**). Back in Australia and preparing for his first IAAF World Championships appearance, he walked a big 5000m PB of **18:56.96** in winning the Down Under Meet in Brisbane in early July. His World Championships walk in Moscow in August saw him come 11th in **1:23:06**, an excellent debut and one that earmarked him as a young walker on the rise – he had just turned 21 years of age. He finished off his winter with a repeat win in the Australian Winter 20km roadwalk championship in windy conditions in Tasmania (**1:25:43**).



Left: Dane mixes it with the top men in Sesto San Giovanni in May 2013
Right: Dane walks in his first IAAF World Championships in August 2013

In early November 2013, Dane recorded a sizzling **5:16.39** in winning the QA 1500m Track Classic in Brisbane. The next day he was off to China for the inaugural Lake Taihu 4 Day Rally. He only lasted 2 days before retiring but he would remedy that a year later.

With the 2014 Commonwealth Games excluding racewalks, the Racewalking World Cup was the only international vest on offer for the year and Dane confirmed his spot with a win in the Australian 20km summer championship in Hobart (**1:22:39**). But it was a bitter sweet win as Jared Tallent had crossed the line first, only to be retrospectively disqualified in somewhat controversial circumstances. Anyway, a win's a win and the disqualification had nothing to do with Dane who continued his fine form in the subsequent weeks with 3000m (**11:22**) and 5000m (**19:00**) walks in Brisbane. Travelling to Nomi in mid March for the IAAF Challenge Series walk there, he came a superb 4th in a PB **1:21:01**. 3 weeks later, he won the inaugural Australian T&F Championships 10,000m walk in a new Australian record of **38:57.16**.

He kicked off a 2 month overseas venture with his IAAF World Cup 20km walk in Taicang - 11th in a PB **1:20:27**. Then on to La Coruna (6th in **1:21:42**) before a few weeks in England which saw wins in the British National 20km (**1:24:03**), the Athletics England 10,000m Track Championship (**39:48.63**) and the British 5000m Track Championship (**19:14.53**). He finished off his tour with a final 3000m race in the Cork City Spots Meet in Ireland, winning in a huge PB of **10:56.23** (only 0.01 sec outside Andrew Jachno's Australian and Commonwealth record).

Back in Australia, he won the Australian Winter 20km championship yet again (**1:27:38** in Albany) before trying his hand a second time in the Lake Taihu 4 Day Rally in China. This year he made no mistakes, coming third on day 1, winning on days 2 and 3 and only losing the overall lead on day 4 when he suffered a 1 minute Pit Stop violation mid race in the final leg. His overall 4 day tally gained him second place overall, only 34 seconds behind 2012 Olympic 20km champion Ding Chen of China, 3:18:41 to 3:18:07. Dane was now racing in rarefied company indeed!

Dane's 2015 year started with a hiccup when he was a last minute withdrawal from the Australian Summer 20km Championship in Adelaide, the victim of a heavy cold. But it was only a temporary setback as he was back a month later to win the Australian 10,000m Track Championship in Brisbane with **39:53.89**. Then it was off to Taicang for their leg of the IAAF Challenge Series and he showed his form with 5th in **1:22:12**. He walked even better the following month in La Coruna, finishing 5th in a PB **1:20:05**. This was followed a month later by a win in the World Universiade 20km in Gwanju, South Korea. In a desperate sprint finish with Canada's Ben Thorne, Dane won out by the narrowest of margins in a time of **1:21:30**. Then it was onto Beijing for the IAAF World Championships 20km where he finished 8th in **1:21:37**. Then it was back to the Lake Taihu 4 Day Rally where he finished 2nd to Ding Chen again with daily finishes of 4th, 1st, 3rd and 1st. 2015 had definitely been his best year ever and he was now a regular top finisher on the world stage.



Dane walks to gold in the 2015 World Universiade 20km in Gwanju

With the Olympics beckoning next year, he is one of a number of very talented young walkers who will fight out the 20km

walk. Without doubt, Dane has the endurance and the sheer speed needed to be at the pointy end of the race – then it will just be a case of who wins out in what will be a very exciting last few laps.

Some other facts about Dane to round off this article.

Unlike some of our past and present top walkers, Dane loves to race. Even in recent years when he has been racing at the elite level, he continues to support local races and uses them to build on and maintain his fitness. His yearly totals for the last few years read as follows: 2009 (23 races), 2010 (26 races), 2011 (21 races), 2012 (24 races), 2013 (17 races), 2014 (22 races) and 2015 (16 races).

Dane follows in his father's footsteps in terms of his run/walk capability. At age 16, he boasted 48.4 for 400m and 4:03 for 1500m. It is fair to say that he could have chosen any of a number of sports and achieved at any of them. We are lucky that he chose the walk rather than other higher profile disciplines.

His walk PBs read so impressively:	1500m	5:16.39	Brisbane, QLD	07/11/2013
	3000m	10:56.23	Cork, IRE	08/07/2014
	5000m	18:56.96	Brisbane, QLD	05/07/2013
	10000m	37:57.16	Melbourne, VIC	04/04/2014
	10km	38:56	Brisbane, QLD	29/07/2012
	20km	1:20:05	Coruna, SPA	06/06/2015

It is hard to believe that Dane is only 23 years of age. He has many years of improvement to come and I look forward to making further updates to this brief article.

Tim Erickson
Sunday 15 November 2015