

## *Alana Barber – 2016 Olympian*

2015	IAAF World Champs	Beijing	20km	18 <sup>th</sup>	1:33:30
2016	IAAF Racewalking Teams Championships	Rome	20km	25 <sup>th</sup>	1:32:48
2016	Olympic Games	Rio de Janeiro	20km	35 <sup>th</sup>	1:35:55

29 year old Alana Barber was born on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1987 in Auckland, New Zealand.

Her mother Shirley Somervell ran at the 1974 Commonwealth Games, finishing seventh in the 800m final, and it was in primary school that Alana kick started her own athletics career as a keen sprinter. Her parents joined her up to the local running club and she ran for fun, turning up once a week but never taking it too seriously.

When her mother reached the age of 50, she considered a transition from running to power walking, as running was proving to be too hard on her body. She found that this mode of progression was not fast enough, and subsequently took up racewalking. At twelve years of age, Barber accompanied her mother to try it out.

After suffering from reoccurring soreness in the knees from running, Alana eventually took up racewalking herself, aged 22.

*I just thought this could be a way of keeping fit without aggravating my knee. After a few months of doing it, I really got into it. The people were friendly and the whole concept of the sport was challenging: the fact that you don't just go from A to B as quick as you can like running. You also need to keep this specific technique no matter how tired you get. This made the sport extra interesting.*

She never went back to running competitively.

Her first exposure to the world of international racewalking was in February 2010 when she competed in a NZ team in the Australian 20km Racewalk Championship in Hobart, as part of a biennial Australia vs NZ walks competition. Her time was promising – she was 9<sup>th</sup> in the Open race in **1:58:58** and 5<sup>th</sup> in the associated U23 race.



*Alana (front right) with the rest of the NZ team at the 2010 Australian 20km roadwalk championships in Hobart*

A month later, she improved her 20km time to **1:57:53** in Christchurch. She was back in Australia in August 2010, coming 6<sup>th</sup> in the Australian 20km Roadwalk Championship in Brisbane with a time of **1:59:25**.

For the next couple of years, her times stagnated. The small racewalking footprint in New Zealand did not provide a good enough springboard to further reduce her times. She recorded 1:58:59 in competition in Dunedin in 2011 and 2:03:13 in Waitakere in 2012. She was going backwards.

In 2012, she made a decision that would have great significance for her career, travelling to England with 2012 New Zealand Olympic walker Quentin Rew and eventually staying for two years at Leeds.

*I lived in Leeds for two years and trained at the UK Race Walking Centre which is based at Leeds Met University (now Leeds Beckett). This was a crucial part in my development from a club level walker/national champs medalist to a NZ representative. This was the first time I was regularly training with a group under a coach. I was exposed to strength and conditioning work and a scientific aspect of training which I had never thought about before.*

*It was the training group there that got me to the next level. I was constantly pushed by athletes fitter than me, which enabled me to rise to their level. It's easier to get faster when you are working with people whose company you enjoy.*

She made significant inroads in to her PBs while at Leeds, reducing her 20km road walk time to **1:43:46** (2<sup>nd</sup> in British Grand Prix, June 2014), and reducing her 5000m track walk time to **22:11.52** (2<sup>nd</sup> in UK Champs at Birmingham, June 2014).



*Alana competes in York in June 2014 during her 2 year sojourn in England*

Soon after these last PB races, she returned to Auckland to plan her next move. A start in the NZ 20km championship in November 2014 provided a significant milestone for her, with her winning time of **1:39:01** finally breaking the 100 minute barrier.

She then moved to Australia, choosing Melbourne as her base, another significant career move that reaped benefits almost immediately.

After a 2 week training camp at Falls Creek, she settled down into her new life in Melbourne, racing on the local scene with immediate effect - first a 3000m track walk of **13:05** in mid January, then a 5000m track walk of **22:36** two weeks later and finally a 10km roadwalk of **46:49** two weeks after that.

Three weeks later, walking in the Australian 20km roadwalk championship in Adelaide in February 2015, she bettered Gabrielle Gorst's NZ 20km roadwalk record of 1:35:59 (set in Dunedin in March 2003) with a time of **1:35:07**. The big improver in the field, she walked a conservative first half of 47:40, before negative splitting the second half, storming past Stephanie Stigwood and Kelly Ruddick and finishing in fourth place just a few seconds behind Rachel Tallent. Her second

10km was faster than any of the other women in the field and her final time was a PB by nearly 4 minutes. She was now a serious contender for the 2015 IAAF World Championships.

It was hard to believe that when she was last in Australia in 2010, she had walked 1:58:58 in this same race in Hobart. A lot had happened in 5 years!



*Alana storms home in Adelaide (photo Terry Swan)*

Chasing times, she walked in the IAAF Challenge Series meet in Taicing, China, in May 2015. There she raced brilliantly, coming 6<sup>th</sup> overall in a strong international field and finishing ahead of the Australian walkers as an added extra. Alas, conditions were torrid – very hot and sunny – and her time of **1:35:38** was effected accordingly.

Her performances were rewarded with selection in the NZ team to contest the 2015 IAAF World Track & Field Championships in Beijing. There she placed a very creditable 18<sup>th</sup> in the 20km race walk, exceeding expectations and beating many athletes ranked well above her before the event (including the Australians once again). Her time of **1:33:30** was a PB and a new NZ record. She was the second best of the Commonwealth walkers behind Canadian Rachel Seaman who came 13<sup>th</sup> with 1:31:39.



*Alana competes in the 2015 IAAF World Championships in Beijing*

She finished off her international year in September with a fine series of walks in the 4 day Lake Taihu Challenge in China.

While she now had an Olympic B qualifier under her belt, she had to set her sights on even better times if she was to force her way into the NZ Olympic team in 2016 and she soon showed that she was equal to the task.

Walking in the annual Australian 50km meet at Fawcner Park in Melbourne in mid December 2015, she finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the women's 20km in a PB of **1:32:50**. While she could not quite match this performance a couple of months later in the Australian 20km roadwalk championships in Adelaide, dropping to 5<sup>th</sup> place with a time of 1:35:29, she bounced back in March with a much faster **1:33:11** in the Asian 20km roadwalk championship in Nomi, Japan, and it was only the unseasonable hot weather which stopped her from an even faster time.

Alana had been selected in the NZ team to contest the 2016 IAAF World Race Walking Teams Championships in Rome in early May and a big performance was needed there if she was to gain a spot in the NZ Olympic team. She was up to the challenge, walking an inspired race to finish 26<sup>th</sup> in a PB **1:32:48**, chipping a further 2 seconds off her NZ record.



*Alana competes in the 2016 IAAF Race Walking Teams Championships in Rome*

Her Olympic spot was eventually confirmed by the NZ selectors and she was off to St Moritz in July to prepare for her biggest ever race, the Rio Olympics.

Alas, Alana's Rio experience was a tough ask for her. Although she gave her usual 110% to finish 35<sup>th</sup> in a time of **1:35:55**, it was always going to be hard for her to reproduce her form from earlier in the year as she had to chase race after race to satisfy the NZ selectors and nail her place in the team. It is nearly impossible to come back up after that sort of pressurised preparation.

As an aside, both she and Quentin Rew competed in the Rio Olympic walks while based in Melbourne and while active members of the Victorian Race Walking Club. For VRWC, it was a wonderful Games – the club had 6 members competing in Rio, with Alana and Quentin joined by Chris Erickson, Rhyddian Cowley, Regan Lamble and Rachel Tallent. I think that must be some sort of record!



*Alana competes in her first Olympics in Rio*

She finished off her international year with another appearance in the 4 day Lake Taihi Classic in China in late September and then it was back to bases to start preparing for 2017.

She made a significant decision at this stage, opting to return to her home base of Auckland. She hadn't been living in New Zealand for over 4 years now and she felt it was time to return to her native country.

She was soon back in Australia, returning for the Australian 50km Championship meet at Fawkner Park in Melbourne in mid December. There, she surprised herself with a convincing win in a time of **1:32:59**. She had only just started serious training again after a post-Olympic break and her time was unexpected. In fact, it was a New Zealand double, with fellow Rio Olympian Quentin Rew winning the men's 20km with 1:24:57.

After a quick trip back home for Christmas, she then returned to Australia, where she had the chance to participate in a 6 week racewalking camp at the AIS in Canberra. It was an opportunity for some hard training alongside a bevy of international walkers. The weather was horrendous as Canberra sweltered under its hottest summer in many years but the experience was still a good one and it quickly paid dividends.

With nearly all the international walkers opting to stay on and compete in the Australian 20km roadwalk championships in Adelaide in mid February 2017, the carnival provided a wonderful racing opportunity – a high quality field and a great preparation. Alana responded to the challenge, coming 4<sup>th</sup> overall in a PB time of **1:32:23**.



She now had her sights set on the 2017 IAAF World Championships but selection is not a given, even with her current performances. The NZ selectors have set a B standard of 1:31:00, so Alana had to cut even more off her time.

She showed she was moving in the right direction with a high quality walk in the Auckland Athletics Championships in early March, her 3000m track walk time of **12:37.82** a NZ residential record.

From there, it was overseas to target further 20km races as she continued her push towards London 2017. Over the next few months, she contested 20km races in the Mexican cities of Ciudad Juarez (**1:34:56**) and Monterrey (**1:36:16**), Taicang (**1:35:28**), La Coruna (**1:35:37**) and finally she finished second in the British 20km championship in Leeds, England (**1:32:38**). A week after her walk at Leeds, she finished second in the British 5000m track championship in a 30 second PB time of **21:59.41**.

Will it be enough for selection to the World Championships in London. Only time will tell. She has done everything she can to convince the selectors.

In summary, Alana has had a wonderful last few years, with more to come. She has put together a whole string of top quality 20km performances, with 7 times under 1:33:00 and 13 times under 1:36:00. Now that's impressive!