

ATHANASIA TSOUMELEKA - OLYMPIC 20 KM WINNER, 2004, ATHENS

The following article appeared on the IAAF website. It gives us some excellent background information on 2004 Olympic 20 km walk winner Athanasia Tsoumeleka. She was certainly no dark horse but had a proven track record of big time performances over the last few years. Given that, her 2004 Olympic victory was not such a surprise after all.

The annual IAAF World Race Walking Challenge and the introduction of official World records for road events has greatly enhanced the profile of Race Walking in the Athletics world. Yet undoubtedly the World Championships and Olympic Games remain the premier occasions for race walkers to step into the consciousness of the wider general public.

In Athens this summer, taking advantage of this year's race walking spot light was a young Greek girl, Athanasia Tsoumeleka, who at 22 years of age took the women's 20km Olympic crown, bringing the host nation their first athletics gold of the Games.

Tsoumeleka was born in Preveza, a small town on the western coast of Greece, on February 2, 1982. She grew up there, with her parents, who ran a fish shop in the town, and who fully backed their daughter's dedication to her sport. Yet not even these proud parents could have ever imagined that their tiny enterprise would become the centre of national celebration, thanks to their daughter's love of walking. But on the 23 August 2004, this is exactly what occurred as the people of Preveza gathered at the shop to celebrate Tsoumeleka's Olympic triumph.

Suddenly, with the national media descending on the shop, it was time for everyone in the country to know about the Tsoumeleka family. Immediately the new Olympic Champion acknowledged the debt she owed to her parents "My only want is to relieve my parents, wiping out the obligations and the stress they have experienced all these years," thanks to helping her sport.

Inspired by Voula Patoulidou's Olympic win in the 100m Hurdles in 1992, Tsoumeleka started training in the Club "Asteras Prevezas" when she was 11 years old, initially as a long distance runner. "I cried every time I watched Voula's final in Barcelona. She has always been my standard."



Her career as a walker started accidentally, few years later, when the club asked her to participate in the walking event of the local championships, hoping that she could win some points. Tsoumeleka made no special preparations for the event, completing her usual daily training programme before participating in the walk, but yet went on to win the race, although she had never been taught any race walking technique. Overcoming some hesitations, she agreed to participate in the National Championships of the same year,

and just one month after her first ever walk race, she managed to win the national title in her junior category (in 1998), and start a new career.

Next year, she moved to Athens, entering the Panteion University and joining Nikos Dimitriadis, who has been the coach of the most successful Greek long distance runners and walkers.

During the period of 2000-2003, Tsoumeleka saw clear signs of her talent and potential. A new national record accompanied most of her races. In fact during the period she broke the national records 17 times in junior and senior women's categories. In 2000, she represented Greece in the World Junior Championships held in Santiago de Chile, where she placed fourth in the 10,000m walk. Then in 2001 she won the silver medal in the European Junior Championships in Grosseto, also at 10km. In the senior European Championships in Munich in 2002, her first international appearance in the senior women's category at a major championships, she took a very creditable 9th place. Then in 2003 she won the gold medal of the European Under 23 Championships in Bydgoszcz, Poland, and a few months later, her 7th place in the World Championships of Paris confirmed her position as the rising star of international race walking.

In the Greek language, Tsoumeleka's christian name 'Athanasia' means immortality, and there is no doubt that she joined the Pantheon of the Olympic race walking Gods this summer.

"I started the race believing that I would be placed among the top eight athletes, hopefully not lower than the position I won in Paris. After the initial stages I was planning my pace in order to secure eighth place, then seventh, then sixth, then fifth... I could see myself even at fourth position. And there I stopped. I couldn't imagine myself on the podium. Yet after 17km there were only three athletes left in medal contention, and I stared at my coach and thought it was time for the gold." Tsoumeleka recounted after crossing the finishing line.

Her win in the 20km Race Walk (1:29:12) was at the time only the second ever women's Olympic track and field victory for Greece, after Patoulidou's victory in 1992, and many people welcomed it as one of the most unexpected results of the Olympics.

However, Tsoumeleka only slightly improved on the Paris' mark (1:29:34), which had brought her seventh position. She and her coach, planned a strategy, to exploit all the comparative advantages they had. After all she was going to walk on a road that she had walked hundreds of times during the last few years, and as a 'local' she was completely adjusted to the specific warm weather conditions.

"We planned a strategy adapted not so much to the other competitors, but to our own possibilities", Dimitriadis explains. And they won. Because, using the champion's words, "walking means endurance and technique and continuous thinking, supported by days and days of endless training."

Tsoumeleka has become Olympic champion at an exceptionally young age, so what are her sporting expectations now?

"I cannot have higher expectations. I am already Olympic Champion, there is nothing more important than this. I wish to God that I would win more Olympics. But more than this, I also want to be an Olympic Champion in life. I want to be close to the children, to transfer my experience. I have plans to visit schools, to be in contact with them, whenever my athletics obligations leave some free time."

This story has a sad end.

After the birth of her first child, Tsoumaleka returned to competition, eventually finishing ninth in the 2008 Olympic 20k walk in Beijing in a personal best of 1:27:54, some 3½ minutes behind winner Olga Kaniskina of Russia. However, subsequent testing (in January 2009) of a routine sample she provided two days before the opening of the Beijing Olympics showed the presence of CERA, an advanced version of the blood-booster EPO. She immediately announced her retirement from competition, effective immediately.

"I was informed that there is a problem with a positive test for (EPO) in a sample I submitted on Aug. 6, 2008. I will not try to excuse myself, even though I have not knowingly made use of this substance," Tsoumeleka told radio station Skai. "The fact that sample are tested more than once - that is, opened not in my presence - makes me feel uneasy about the whole process. My unfortunate involvement ... forces me to put an end to the high-level competitive sports I love so much and not wait to continue after the expiration of my expected punishment." ¹

1 http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Sport/Story/STIStory_327713.html

Tsoumeleka's positive test result was one of a number affecting Greek athletes at that time. Fani Halkia, the 2004 Olympic 400-meter hurdles champion, was dropped from the team in Beijing and expelled from the athletes' village after testing positive for the anabolic steroid methyltrienolone. Fourteen other Greeks, including 11 weightlifters, tested positive for the same substance before the Olympics.

Tsoumeleka was subsequently handed a two-year ban from competition by Greece's Track and Field Federation and was eventually charged under Greece's penal code with using an illegal performance-enhancing drug. Athens prosecutor Costas Simitzoglou charged Tsoumeleka with breaking the country's strict anti-doping laws, recently revised to include jail-time. This charge carried a maximum two-year jail term. The outcome of her trial is as yet unknown.

It was a sad end to a fine career.