

ROBERT KORZENIOWSKI IN PROFILE

Robert Korzeniowski, 1996 and 2000 Olympic champion and 2003 World Champion, is without doubt the greatest walker in the world today and a firm favourite to win the 2004 Olympic 50 km title. This profile, recently published by Reuters, is compulsory reading for all followers of racewalking.



Korzeniowski, far left, surveys the leading group as they approach the first feeding table at the 3 km mark in the 2003 World Championship 50 km walk in Paris

When a young Robert Korzeniowski gave up judo for competitive walking it looked as though he had made a big mistake. Other disciplines such as the sprints and pole vault were regarded as the glamour events of athletics while walkers were ridiculed by spectators who dubbed them "ducks" because of their characteristic wobbly walk.

But Korzeniowski is having the last laugh. Twenty years, 120,000 kilometres and three Olympic titles later, he is a national hero in Poland and the country's hottest prospect for the Athens Games. In August, a month after he turns 36, he will be stepping out for a place in history as Poland's best Olympic athlete ever. A fourth gold would put the slender, 1.7-metre athlete ahead of Irena Szewinska, a sprinter in the 1960s and 1970s who won three Olympic golds, three silvers and one bronze medal.

"I am aiming for gold, but I don't think about such statistics," Korzeniowski told Reuters in a telephone interview. "Each event is a new challenge, past medals are -- both symbolically and literally -- tucked away."

Korzeniowski, who is afforded a celebrity status usually reserved for soccer players and entertainers at home, will defend his 50-km walk title on August 27. He has visited Greece twice over the last six months and will acclimatise himself in the country for two weeks before his event.

He plans to retire after Athens, having turned his much-derided discipline into gold on and off the track.

After a disappointing Olympic debut in Barcelona in 1992, when he was disqualified from the 50 km at the entrance to the stadium while in second place, Korzeniowski spent several years in France. He won his first Olympic gold in Atlanta in 1996 over 50 km and added two titles in Sydney four years later, over 20 and 50 km. He has won world championship gold three times and is world record holder in his favourite 50-km event, on which he will concentrate in Athens.

When back in Poland, he divides his time off the circuit between charity work, promoting walking among schoolchildren, a track and field team he helps to run and his own brand of sports clothing, "Walker." In an unusual tribute to his popularity, one Polish sex website used his name as bait to lure surfers to its pages.

The 50-km walk, where athletes clock up more than 3-1/2 hours, is the longest athletics event and Korzeniowski, who won his first world championship title in Athens in 1997, said the sweltering August heat would be a major challenge. "In 1997 the temperature at the finishing line was 44 degrees (Celsius), so I know what to prepare for," he said.

Korzeniowski, who has always stuck to his own training routine drawn up with his long-time coach Krzysztof Kisiel,

said that just like in Atlanta and Sydney he would be preparing for his race far away from the Olympic Village. "Of course I'll be in Athens for the event and will visit fellow athletes in the village, but I've been to three Olympics and I know that it is better to concentrate and prepare in peace."

In Greece, after a brief reconnaissance in February, he has chosen a small town in the Peloponese, some 200 kms from Athens. "It wasn't easy to find the right place...Greece has a lot of mountains and there are a lot of roads that are just too steep," he said.

Security will be a top concern of the organisers of the first summer Olympics since the September 11 2001 attacks on United States cities and last year's war in Iraq and Korzeniowski said he welcomed the heightened precautions. "I am aware of the threats and I respect those who protect us and the procedures. The Games increasingly resemble a military camp...but we live in such a world that it is necessary." But he would not let concerns about safety overshadow the Games or affect his concentration. "I believe in destiny and I'm not one of those who are afraid to board a plane. I was on a plane just a few days after September 11."

In walking events, running -- with both feet off the ground at once -- is a more common form of cheating than using illegal drugs but Korzeniowski said he fully supported athletics' battle against doping. "If we give up, sport will never be able to aspire to its educational role," he said. He was confident that the latest scandal surrounding the discovery of the designer steroid THG, which led to the suspension of Britain's European 100 metres champion Dwain Chambers, would not cast a pall over the Athens Games. "Such things, sadly, will keep on happening, but they will affect individual disciplines and athletes, not the Olympics as a whole."

By Tomasz Janowski, ATHENS, April 13 (Reuters)