

Dion Russell

1992	World Junior Champs	Soeul	10,000m	14 th	45:01
1994	World Junior Champs	Lisbon	10,000m	8 th	41:50
1995	World Student Games	Fukuoka	20 km	8 th	1:27:20
1995	Racewalking World Cup	Atlanta	20 km	47 th	1:30:04
1997	IAAF World Champs	Athens	20 km	32 nd	1:30:49
1997	Racewalking World Cup	Prague	20 km	50 th	1:23:49
1998	Commonwealth Games	Kuala Lumpur	50 km	DNF	
1999	Racewalking World Cup	Mezidon	50 km	DNF	
1999	IAAF World Champs	Seville	50 km	13 th	3:59:23
2000	Olympic Games	Sydney	20 km	25 th	1:25:26
2000	Olympic Games	Sydney	50 km	27 th	4:02:50

Born 8th May 1975 and the son of former Victorian country champion walker Graham Russell, Dion Russell was an outstanding junior.

He summed up his early career as follows:

My first ever Race walk was in Little A's although it wasn't the best introduction - I was pulled off the track in the 800m walk (and my Dad was the chief judge!). But then after a 5 year break from athletics I made a reappearance at senior aths one Saturday afternoon. I started race walking properly at 13 when I joined Doncaster Athletic Club in 1988. Dad taught me the technique during mid-week training sessions down at the track. At the time I was also playing State level basketball and swimming at Australian championships. After a couple of seasons I had to decide which sport to pursue as the training for different sports was getting too hectic (and Dad probably got tired of driving me around everywhere!). I competed in my first Australian Under Age (U 16) championship in Adelaide in 1989, finished 5th (Gary Vogler won). It is probably accurate to say that I didn't start training towards championships until I was 17 when I was close to qualifying for the World Juniors in Seoul.

His early training under his father was not very tough by modern standards – he trained twice a week and raced interclub on Saturdays. His performances were the result of sheer talent rather than a finely honed training regime. As Doncaster Athletics Club was unable to field a team for Winter races, he moved to Athletics Essendon (his grandfather was a life member there and his father was with Essendon all through his junior days, so it made 3 generations of Russells with the club).



1991 – Dion Russell and Gabrielle Blythe

He came 2nd in the Australian Schools Under 17 6 km roadwalk (27:07) in Brisbane in 1990 and was never out of the medals after that. He broke all Victorian records on his way through from Under 17 to Under 20 and many still stand

today. A number were also Australian Records at the time and he remains the most outstanding Junior male walker produced in Australia.) Yet at this stage of his career, he was still swimming competitively and came 4th in the 200m Backstroke at the 1990 Australian Swimming Championships.

Wins in the 1991 Australian Under 16 and Under 18 track titles in March, the Australian All Schools Under 17 5 km road (22:21) in June, the Australian Under 18 8 km road (36:39) in August and the Australian All Schools Under 17 3000m Track (11:52.8) in November gave notice of his potential. His 3000m time was a new Australian Under 18 record.

This potential was confirmed in January 1992 when he finished 7th in the Victorian 10,000m track title in a new National Under 18 record of 43:44. This beat the qualifying standard for the World Junior Championships by an amazing 76 seconds and gained him selection. In that same month he also gained another international vest – a selection in the Australian Under 21 Track and Field Team which competed in New Zealand. In February he was in the record books once again with 20:47 for the 5000m.

In quick succession, he won the 1992 Australian Junior 5000m track title (21:16) in March, the Pacific Schools Under 21 3000m walk in Darwin in April, the Australian Under 18 8 km roadwalk (34:21) in May, the LBG 10 km Junior road walk (43:36) in June and the Australian Junior 10 km roadwalk (44:00) in August. Three weeks later in Seoul, he came a creditable 14th in 45:01.

As the summer started, Dion continued on his merry way with new Victorian U18-U20 track records for 1500m (5:38.8) and 5000m (20:29.5). A win in the Australian All Schools Under 19 3000m walk (12:08) in December in Perth finished off a great year.

1993 was an extraordinary year by any standards. He came 2nd to Steve Beecroft in the Victorian 10000m track title in January with 44:07, won the Victorian Under 18 3000m and Open 5000m (21:01) titles and then successfully defended his Australian Under 18 3000m track title (12:12) and his Australian Junior 5000m track title (21:23) to complete a dominant summer.

Then during the winter season, he won the Victorian Under 18 8 km, Junior 20 km and Open 15 km (1:05:58) road titles as well as defending his Australian Junior 10 km road title (44:42) and adding the Australian Junior 20 km road title (1:29:50) to his rapidly growing list of achievements. This sub 90 minute performance was a new championship record. In the midst of these fine road walks, he produced a record breaking 10,000m track walk (42:35) in July to gain selection for his second World Junior Championships.

1994 marked the start of his AIS career and he was coached by Simon Baker for the next 4 years. (When Ron Weigel arrived in 1997, he trained under his expert eye until his retirement at the end of 2000. But he still rates his father as the biggest influence on his walking career. Not only did he introduce him to the sport and coach him through the underage ranks but he kept a keen interest in his progress once he moved to Canberra).

Under Simon, his rapid progress continued. On January 20, he recorded 20:01 in a 5000m trackwalk for new Australian Under 19 and Junior records. Then, after defending his Australian Junior 5000m track title for the third year in a row, he travelled to Europe to prepare for his second World Junior Meet. He won the British 10000m Junior track title as a final warmup and then came a very competitive 8th in Lisbon in 41:50, breaking Nick A'Hern's Australian Junior record.

His final races as a junior continued his domination of the age group. In late March, he won a record fourth Australian Junior 5000m track title. Then in April 1995, less than a month before his 20th birthday he recorded 41:05 for the 10,000m track walk to break his own Australian Junior Record.

When he finally left Junior ranks, he left behind a set of records that set a new standard for excellence. On the Victorian front alone, he set an astounding 37 Underage Racewalking Records (5 U16, 8 U17, 9 U18, 10 U19 and 5 U20). A perusal of the current Athletics Victoria handbook shows that he still holds 12 of these 37 State records at the time of writing.

28/11/1991	3000m	U17/U18	11:52.8
05/01/1992	10,000m	U18	43:44.2
09/02/1992	5000m	U17	20:47:36
21/10/1992	1500m	U18/U19	5:38.8
12/11/1992	5000m	U18	20:29.5
02/12/1993	3000m	U19	11:47.5
16/09/1993	10,000m	U19	42:35.24
20/02/1994	5000m	U19/U20	20:01.35
01/04/1995	10,000m	U20	41:05

His underage racing record was just as amazing. In an era of top young walkers, he dominated, winning 21 Victorian and 17 Australian Underage Titles (from U16 upwards).

As the 1995 winter season started, Dion turned 20 and officially joined Open ranks but he had already had his first battle with Nick A'Hern. In March, Dion had finished 2nd to Nick in the Australian Open 5000m track title. This was the first of many such encounters with Nick and, for the next few years, it was Nick who normally won (Dion came 2nd to Nick in the 1995 5000m Track Title, 3rd in 1996 and 2nd in the 1996 and 1997 National 20 km titles).

1995 was an exciting year with his first Racewalking World Cup appearance in Beijing (53rd in **1:28:25**) in May and a World Student Games walk in Fukuoka (8th in **1:27:20**) in September. This was followed by 2nd to Nick in the Olympic Games 20 km trial. Olympic selection was confirmed.

In April 1996, Dion headed off to Germany for his Olympic preparation. In April, he won the German National 20 km roadwalk title and raced impressively in a number of races. But his first Olympic walk was perhaps personally disappointing, in that he came 47th in **1:30:04**. He needed further time to mature as a 20 km walker. The transition from junior to senior ranks was not easy and further hard work was on the agenda.

1997 saw Dion reduce his 20 km time to **1:23:16** with yet another 2nd place to Nick in the Australian 20 km road title. This year also saw him represent Australia in the IAAF World Championships in Rome (32nd in **1:30:49**) and the Racewalking World Cup in Prague (50th in **1:23:49**). The contract could not have been more extreme – Rome produced sweltering conditions and Prague produced snow!



Dion Russell far left, 1997 World Cup of Racewalking, Podebrady. Behind him are seen Nathan Deakes and Brent Valance. (photo: Jeff Cassin)

1997 saw a new racewalking coach, Ron Weigel, join the AIS. Ron quickly reviewed his walkers and started to gear Dion's training towards the 50 km event. His training load increased and his weight dropped. While he had previously raced at 78-80 kg, he soon dropped to a new racing weight of 70-72 kg. He was 3rd in the Canberra 20 mile event in June (**2:27:36**) and had his first 50 km test in December 1997 at the Australian title race in Melbourne. The result was his first Open title with a great time of **3:48:12**. This put him third in the all time Australian rankings behind Simon Baker and Willi Sawall – and he was still only 22 years of age. This was the Commonwealth Games selection trial so he gained automatic selection with this performance.

Dion followed this up with second placings to Nick in the 1998 5000m track (**19:39.6**) and the 1998 Australian 20 km road (**1:27:02**) championships. Nick still had the advantage over the shorter races but Dion had found a new longer distance at which he excelled. He went in to the Kuala Lumpur Commonwealth Games 50 km as one of the favourites and led early. But the heat was too much and he retired before halfway, leaving team mates Duane Cousins and Dominic McGrath to pick up medals in his place.

He bounced back in December 1998, winning his second successive Australian 50 km title in a PB time of **3:47:34**. In what had been a mixed year, he finished the year with 2nd place to Nick A'Hern in the National rankings in the 5000m track (**19:39.6**) and 20 km (**1:23:40**) and 1st place in the National rankings in the 30 km (**2:17:21**) and 50 km (**3:47:34**).

1999 saw him finally defeat Nick on his own terms. The National 20 km road title was held at Princes Park in Melbourne in March and Dion won easily in **1:20:49** (Nick was 2nd in 81:18). The tough training regime of the last few years was reaping benefits and his short distance times were now improving along with his 50 km times.

In August he finished 13th in the IAAF World Championships in Seville. The time of **3:59:23** was very good considering the hot conditions. Coming back to Australia, he put in a further 3 months of hard work in Canberra before fronting for the Australian 50 km title race in Melbourne. This was also the Olympic 50 km selection trial. In that race, he and Nathan Deakes walked together the whole way and crossed the line for equal 1st in **3:52:33** – it was a performance that was really only a training walk and neither competitor raised more than a puff of effort.

But, unknown to most, Dion had decided by the end of 1999 that it was time to move on from a full time walking career – there were other priorities that he had to honour. The Sydney Olympics would be his last international event. He continued with his walking preparation but, in terms of training mileage, the 6 months leading up to the Olympics were perhaps the leanest within the preceding 18 months.

In February 2000, he contested the Australian 20 km road title race and finished 4th (3rd Australian) in **1:24:09**. Then it was off to Mexico for a month's training at altitude, followed by 5th in a 20 km race in Copenhagen in **1:27:18**, then back home again and 1st place in the Canberra 20 mile event in June in **2:21:35**.

In the Sydney Olympics he came 25th in the 20 km in **1:25:26** and 27th in the 50 km in **4:02:50**. This was followed by the surprise public announcement that he was retiring from the sport. He resigned his AIS scholarship and moved on.

His Sydney performances must be seen in this light and his comment below puts walking as a sport into its proper perspective. It is after all only a sport and it is to be savoured while it can. Eventually other more important priorities emerge and people must make tough decisions.

At the end of the day, I was in fact very happy with my results in Sydney, even if others had different expectations and were subsequently disappointed.

It is to Dion's credit that he could make such a decision while he was still at the top of the sport. In retrospect, his times put him amongst our best ever 20 km and 50 km exponents and his 10 year racewalking career leaves no doubt as to his talent and competitiveness.

He still resides in Canberra where he has started his family. His studies finished, he now works within the Australian Sports Commission.