

## ***Kellie Wapshott: 2006-2008***

2006	Racewalking World Cup	La Coruna	20 km	38 <sup>th</sup>	1:36:49
2008	Racewalking World Cup	Cheboksary	20km	DNS	
2008	Olympic Games	Beijing	20 km	39 <sup>th</sup>	1:37:59

With her selection in the women's 20 km racewalk in the 2006 World Race Walking Cup, Kellie Wapshott became the next in a long line of Victorian walkers who have won the coveted Australian racing vest. Kellie, born 23 March 1981, was 24 years old at that stage and lived in Wantirna South, one of Melbourne's Eastern suburbs.

Kellie started in Little Athletics as a 7 year old, but the racewalk was not initially her forte:

*I used to hate the walk and got disqualified every time I did it, but my parents kept talking me into trying again, giving every event an attempt. I was actually taught initially how to race walk by a friend's older brother when I'd gone to their house to play after school. They were in the same club and we just going up and down the footpath in front of their house until I got it. Then it just clicked and I raced at Little Aths and improved and Dave Blackwood asked me if I'd like to come to training with him. At the time I had been training in Richard Huggins' running group, so I used to start with run training for the start of the session, then join in with the walkers. Eventually I gave up the running part. Running never had been my best skill, I did manage a Bronze at the LA U15 State Titles though on race walking training.*

Her first crack at championship level racing ended ignominiously – she finished third but was subsequently disqualified in the Victorian Little Athletics Under 11 State Championship. She bounced back and was soon a regular medallist at State level.

In 1993, she improved to finish 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Little Athletics Under 12 State Championship (**7:37**) in March, medalled in the winter season AV Under 14 road championship and finished the year with gold in the Victorian All Schools Under 14 1500m walk in a PB time of **7:10.0**. Even at that early age, her 3 main attributes were easy to see – speed, speed and speed.

1994 saw her reach even greater heights as she won the Victorian Little Athletics U13 title (**7:01.3**) and the AV U14 track title and take silver in the Australian Under 14 1500m track walk (**6:59.9**). Her only disappointment for the summer was in the Australian Little Athletics Teams Championships when she fell while leading the 1500m walk and had to settle for silver.

From then on, she was never out of the medals in Schools, AV and AA under age competitions. The interstate competition was fierce with rivals like Michelle French, Renee McAskill and Claire Bock. She sometimes even competed up the age groups against the likes of Natalie Saville.

But Kellie did not revel in the fierce competition and, on the whole, restricted her races to the Victorian front. For instance, in 1995, she won 5 golds in Victorian competition but only competed in one Australian title race – the Under 15 All Schools 1500m walk where she finished third in **6:37.03**.

*When I was younger it wasn't so much the competition I was avoiding with the NSW girls, it was more I was shy and didn't like going away with people I didn't know. I was friends with Brigid McGinniskin, so the comps I did go to were generally ones she went to as well and we often roomed together.*



*Kellie (second from right) and Chris Erickson (second from left) contest the Victorian U16 3km roadwalk in 1997*

Her first National championship came in 1996 when she won the Australian All Schools U17 3000m walk (as part of the 1996 Pacific Schools Games) in **14:32.6**. Yet in 1997 and 1998 when doing her last 2 years at school, she continued to restrict her racing to the home front. Accumulating more and more Victorian gold, she was a conspicuous absentee from the major Australian titles. In general, she just did not want to go. Her only two National races in this two year period were the Australian Under 20 5000m walk in 1997 (she finished fifth in **26:26**) and the Australian Under 18 3000m walk in 1998 where she finished second in **14:06.8**.

In fact, it was not until after the completion of her secondary school studies that she really knuckled down to some consistently serious training and set her sights on achieving something at the National level.

She showed what she was really capable of in early March 1999 when she won the Victorian Under 18 Interclub Grand Final 1500m walk in **6:14.6**. Those of us who were there remember the fantastic walk between her and Chris Erickson – Chris eventually pipped her over the finish line with 6:14.2 but it was touch and go all the way. Sadly Kellie was denied the State record at the time because it was a mixed race.

She backed up to win the Victorian U20 5000m walk in **24:38.4** and then improved by a huge margin to win the Australian Junior 5000m title in **23:12.3**. That winter she also won the Victorian (**51:18**) and Australian (**51:53**) Junior 10 km road titles. It was her best year so far – she had finally arrived at the National level.

Kellie expected 2000, her last year as a Junior, to be her biggest so far with the possibility of a trip to the World Junior championships on offer. Alas, a bout of glandular fever put the end to her hopes. She successfully defended her Australian Junior 5000m and 10 km road titles and won her customary swag of Victorian gold medals but her times were all down on 1999 and she struggled to train and race competitively.

She finished her junior career with 5 gold, 2 silver and 2 bronze medals at Australian level and so many Victorian medals that I lost count but, at that stage, she looked like yet another highly promising junior lost to the ranks. She did not race at all in 2001 and restricted her appearances to the Victorian State League competition in 2002, 2003 and 2004. She could not race on Saturdays because of work and her previous fire was no longer there. She did win the 2002, 2003 and 2004 Victorian 5000m track titles (**23:30**, **23:23** and **25:35**) but on natural talent rather than on training.

After her 2004 Victorian 5000m walk title, she simply stopped training. She was tired of the sport and hadn't really improved since 1999. She played a bit of netball, attempted a season of hockey, swam and ran a bit but no walking. It was not until late that year, after persistent friendly harassment from Kylie Irshad, that she joined the group of walkers training under Paul Van Kopplen. Her opening comments to Paul summed up her state of mind: *"I don't know why I'm even here."*

Paul saw her potential, working hard to bring her into the group and motivate her to 'get serious' once again. The results were quick in coming. In February 2005, she won her fourth straight Victorian 5000m title in a PB time of **23:07**.

Paul wanted her to go to Sydney to race in the Australian 20km championship in March 2005, just to get the feel for racing at the national level again, but A.A. refused her entry as she didn't have a 20km qualifying time within the required period. Phone calls in high places were unsuccessful.

With Paul stepping back from his coaching role for family reasons around that time, Frank Bertei took up the coaching challenge and soon developed a strong highly motivated team spearheaded by Kellie. The 2005 winter season saw her come second to Simone Wolowiec with further PBs in the Victorian 10 km road title (**47:11**) and the Victorian 20 km road title (**1:37:46**). This time shot her into the National rankings and gave her a Commonwealth Games B qualifier. She finished the winter with silver in the Australian 10 km roadwalk behind Simone in **48:17**. She had arrived back on the scene!



*Kellie comes second in the Australian 10 km title in Adelaide in August 2005*

She was the epitome of the young woman in a hurry. She came 5<sup>th</sup> in the Australian 20 km roadwalk with yet another PB of **1:37:22** and thus gained selection to represent Australia in the 2006 World Race Walking Cup.

She followed up with her 5<sup>th</sup> straight Victorian 5000m title in yet another PB time of **22:35** - the venue the MCG, revamped in preparation for the forthcoming Commonwealth Games.



*Kellie chases Claire Woods in the 2006 AV 5000m race at the MCG*

She then walked yet another PB in the World Racewalking Cup race in Spain in May 2006 to come 38<sup>th</sup> in **1:36:49**.

At this stage, she accepted a scholarship to the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. Unfortunately, the sudden increase in both training intensity and training load wreaked havoc on her finely tuned body and, within weeks, she had acute ITB friction syndrome, her first cortisone injection and 6 weeks of non load bearing exercise. It was not a good start.

It was some time before she could return to competition. Finally in late October 2006, she was back on the track to record a huge PB time of **12:48** in a Canberra interclub race.

After a stint at Thredbo, she travelled to Geelong in December 2006 to race a women's 20 km in the Australian 50 km championship meet. She chased eventual winner Natalie Saville the whole way and was recorded with 2<sup>nd</sup> place and a PB time of **1:35:45**. But her performance came at great personal cost, with sharp pain in the back of her left leg in the final couple of laps.

The various recommended treatments were unsuccessful and eventually she was forced in September 2007 to undergo surgery to remove the scar tissue around her hamstring and sciatic nerve. The surgery was done 5½ months prior to the Olympic trials and the surgeon advised it would take 6 months to recover to full training. Swimming with the local Tridents triathlon squad was a saviour.

She eventually made a long awaited comeback on January 27<sup>th</sup> 2008 with a 10 km hitout in the Canberra National Series meet. Her time of **46:58** was actually a PB although, from Kellie's perspective, it was more a case of relief at finally being able to walk without pain and discomfort.

She had no time to waste with the Olympic trial only 4 weeks away. Her win in the Victorian 5000m track championship in a new Victorian record time of **21:46.70** was a huge confidence booster and she toed the line in the Olympic trial in Melbourne on 23<sup>rd</sup> February with hope of a 'reasonable' performance.

The race was a battle of four with Jo Jackson of England, Kellie, Claire Woods and Natalie Saville passing the 10 km mark in **46:40** and then increasing the pace. Although Jo Jackson was able to break away after 14 km, it was Kellie who found the final lap finish to take the Australian title with a time of **1:32:57**, a PB of nearly 3 minutes. With an Olympic A qualifier in the official trial, Kellie had been selected for the 2008 Racewalking World Cup and for the 2008 Olympics.

As part of the 2008 World Cup preparation, she went to London with the team, but arrived very fatigued and had trouble training. What was thought to be just jet lag ended up being the beginnings of Bronchitis. Trying to train in a weakened state led to a torn tendon in her foot and she withdrew from the Championships, travelling back home to Australia to recuperate.

It was not until late June that she was finally back on the roads pounding the miles. But Kellie had shown previously that she could keep up a high level of fitness with her cross-training and hopes were that a few months of intensive walking would still see her in top shape come August in Beijing.



*Kellie wins Olympic selection with her 1:32:57*

She arrived in Japan in good condition for a final pre-Olympics camp in July 2008. She had instructions from the physiotherapists about the frequency of training – no more than 4 walking sessions a week, no more than 2 days in a row and definitely not 2 sessions in one day. Alas, the guidance was not followed by team management and she was directed to do a second track based speed session (10x400m) on a particular day. She finished the session but then struggled to walk back to the hotel.

For the whole week before the Olympics, she could hardly walk normally. Her Olympic walk (39<sup>th</sup> place with **1:37:59**) was done in continuous pain. The doctor immediately booked her in for an MRI when she returned to Melbourne and she ended up being scheduled for surgery to remove a Complex Ganglion cyst from around her hamstring tendons.

It was another long rehabilitation period. Her only serious race for 2009 saw her place 2<sup>nd</sup> in the LBG Carnival 5km in Canberra in June, her time a reasonable **22:54**. She did not race again until January 2010 when she tried to dust away the cobwebs with a walk in the Canberra Grand Prix 5000m (3<sup>rd</sup> with **22:54**).

She had a last roll of the dice in February 2010 when she placed 4<sup>th</sup> in the Australian 20km championship in Hobart in **1:35:23**. The first 4 women all bettered the Racewalking World Cup standard of 1:36:00 so she looked to have secured a berth.

With a couple of good races under the belt, she was hoping for a quality hitout in the Sydney Track Classic 5000m two weeks later. Although she confirmed her good form with a win in a fast **22:05**, injuries flared once again. She had felt a sharp pain in the front of her right knee while warming up. Told by the physio to go out and race and "we'll sort it out afterwards", she had done just that. But it was not to be sorted that easily - an MRI showed she had cracked the joint cartilage in her knee and that she had femoral condyle bone bruising.

Rest did not fix this particular injury and it marked the end of Kellie's career. She terminated her AIS scholarship and returned to Melbourne where she now lives and works as an osteopath.



*Kellie's last race was a win in the 2010 Sydney Track Classic ahead of Claire Tallent*

Her PBs make for impressive reading and give an indication of her great potential, alas largely untapped.

1500m	<b>6:14.6</b>	Melbourne	13/03/1999
3000m	<b>12:48</b>	Canberra	28/10/2006
5000m	<b>21:46.70</b>	Melbourne	09/02/2008
10 km	<b>46:40</b>	Melbourne	23/02/2008
20 km	<b>1:32:57</b>	Melbourne	23/02/2008

Kellie's story is one of a walker for whom the cards did not play out well. Perhaps different guidance at key times might have led to a different story end but alas, none of us have the gift of foresight in such matters.