

Mark Thomas

1995	Racewalking World Cup	Beijing	50 km	68 th	4.22.38
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Mark Thomas, born 13th December 1962, was first exposed to race walking at 7 years of age when he was taken to the Walkers Club at Albert Park with his father Roy and older brother Stephen. He remembers watching walkers such as Ross Hayward and Graeme Nicholls, seeing Gus Theobald arrive in his Theobald Electricals Falcon wagon and seeing the walkers get prepared in the old clubrooms.

His father convinced him to join the Werribee Little Athletics Club. This club competed at Werribee's Galvin Park, not much more than a mown cow paddock with lanes marked in by white powder. He competed in everything, his first walking race being an 800m. It felt natural to walk and he was surprised to win it by around 250m. He couldn't understand what happened to the other competitors.

Roy entered him in the Victorian Under 9 800m Championship at Olympic Park. This was a huge thing for a Werribee kid. The track in those days was black cinders, powdery and hard. There were about 20 boys in the race; he just walked as fast as he could, coming second to Anthony Clements in 4:20.

His father signed him up to the Victorian Walkers Club and he really enjoyed racing there. Judging was open, encouraging and fair and there seemed to be huge depth in all ages. Races were held on the roads and around the lake and it was a thrill to see the various Olympians competing.

As a 9 year old, he broke the Victorian Under 10 800m walk record at Galvin Park. The time was **4:10** but the record was not recognized because there was only one stopwatch. Little did he know that he would not win another Victorian Championship medal until well into senior ranks. He shared his age group with walkers like Michael Harvey, Andrew Jachno and Martin Richardson. Championship races were fast and medals hard to get.

Athletics sports days at school were fun and, as not many kids in Werribee trained, he always did well, especially in the long distance races. In Year 12, Werribee High School decided to have a walking race as part of the athletics carnival, mainly for his benefit. There were 60 entries! The starter said ... *'if Mark Thomas laps you, you have to pull out'*. At the end of the 1500m race, there were only 5 other walkers left on the track.

Upon finishing his engineering degree at RMIT, he was posted to Adelaide and spent two years there, competing for Port Adelaide. While there, he trained with Ian Fay and Tim Thompson - Ian was preparing for the Racewalking World Cup 50 km. Mark soon realised he needed to increase his mileage if he wanted to be a successful long distance race walker and slowly but surely he did.

Times were good on his return to Melbourne. First he broke 6 minutes for the 1500m and then recorded 12:20 for 3000m but he still struggled with the longer distances. The big breakthrough came in 1986 when he walked a competitive 91 minute 20 km at Albert Park. He realized he now had the potential to represent Australia and went to Sydney for the Racewalking World Cup trial, expecting to easily beat the qualifying standard of 90 minutes. Alas, he struggled in the latter half of the race and came in well down the list in 98 minutes.

His fledgling walking career nearly came to an end in late 1988 when he was working as an automotive suspension engineer. While he was a passenger in a prototype car, the driver lost control, went off a cliff and landed on a huge boulder. The car was a mangled mess of broken glass and bent sheet metal and he suffered a compression fracture of a vertebra. For months afterwards he could barely manage basic chores let alone trying to race walk and train. Even with extensive work, it took 2 to 3 years until his injuries improved to a manageable level.

In 1990/91 he was able to resume consistent training and, with the help of new coach Bruce Dudon, was soon down in the 44 minute range for 10 km and around 93 minutes for 20 km. Then a two year stint in in South Africa during 1991/1992 set his walking back once again and his competitive aspirations had to be satisfied with run runs.

Back in Melbourne, he stepped up his training for the 50 km World Cup trial in late 1992. Leading up to the race he walked well in the shorter races but was continually catching colds. Sure enough he caught the flu the week prior to the trial and subsequently failed to finish in that event.

In 1993, with the help of a dietician, he increased his carbohydrate intake and almost immediately his weight increased, as did his performances in the longer races. He took a string of medals including 3rd in the Victorian 10,000m track walk in **44:20**, 2nd in the Victorian 5000m track walk in **21:18** and 3rd in the Victorian 20 km title in **1:32:47**. As a bonus, he finally finished his first 50 km, taking 3rd in the Victorian title in **4:42.21**.

1994 started well with a **1:30:30** for 20 km. He then joined the 9 Nations Tour and raced over 35 km in Livorno and 20 km in Barcelona. However, on a personal level, 1994 turned out to be a tragic year when he lost his father Roy to cancer. It was some time before Mark could again think seriously about his training and, with the 50 km World Cup Trial to be held in December at Knox, he had to intensify his racing and training in the final months before the big race.

He won all but one of the A Grade Interclub walks in the leadup and, feeding off the regular Sunday morning Tan walks and the midweek Essendon training group walks, started the 50 km event with great expectations. Drama soon developed as the board showed that, with 15 km still to go, he had 2 reports for disqualification. With only 500m to go, he was advised of this third and final report and stepped off the road. Mark Donahoo came running from the drink station to urge him to finish, which he did in fourth place in a time 4 hours and 17 minutes.

Fortunately he had a good racing record up until that point and the selectors threw him a lifeline - finish the 20 km trial with no reports. He was equal to the task, finishing that trial with no reports in around 93 minutes. He was duly selected in the 50 km Australian team for the 1995 Racewalking World Cup in China. At 32 years of age, it had been a long wait.

Mark's World Cup walk in Beijing was a tough one. The weather was warm, humid and smoggy and he was happy with his 67th place finish and time of **4:22:38**. In fact, he was the second Australian to finish behind Michael Harvey.



1995 World Cup of Racewalking, Beijing, China.

Late 1995 and early 1996 were reasonably uneventful, a highlight being his 2nd place finish in the 30 km Victorian Championship in PB of **2:22:58**.

With his sights firmly set on a second World Cup appearance, he trained through the 1996 winter season and put all his eggs into one basket, expecting to produce his 50 km qualifier (a sub 4:20:00) in the trial, to be held in Melbourne in December. But the weather had other ideas and the day saw a hot and sunny 35°C. He actually walked well to finish 4th in 4 hours 23 minutes but was outside the required standard. He later raced the 20 km trial, finishing in **1:30:36**, a good time but again just not fast enough for selection. In February 1977, he competed in a Grand Prix 5000m walk at Olympic Park and, after a slow start, worked his way through the field to finish 7th in a PB of **20:46**. He was in the best form of his life and a 50 km PB was beckoning, so to miss on the team was very disappointing.

His form remained good and, in mid 1998, he finally won his first Victorian title with a 50 km walk of **4:28:05**. His focus was firmly set on the 1999 Racewalking World Cup and he once again prepared well and felt confident. Thus it

was a blow when, just weeks before the trial, he tore the plantar fascia tendon on his foot. He had no time to recover from what was a debilitating and serious injury and yet another World Cup went begging.

This marked the end of Mark's career as a serious racewalker. Injuries had taken their toll and it was now time to focus on family matters and other interests. He still trains to keep fit and made a rare appearance in the 2002 World Masters Games where he strolled to in gold in the M35+ 20 km roadwalk.

Mark still trains because he enjoys it, but we are unlikely to see him return to any serious competition. His one World Cup appearance guarantees him his place in this story but it should have been one of a number of such selections. Mark's PBs show his versatility over the range of walking distances.

3 km	12:12	1993	Olympic Park, Melbourne
5 km	20:46	20/02/97	Olympic Park, Melbourne
10 km	43:06	10/07/93	Albert Park
20 km	1:30:36	22/05/94 and 27/02/97	Knox and Carlton
30 km	2:22:58	1996	Albert Park
50 km	4:22:38	1995	Beijing, China