

Megan Szirom

2008	Racewalking World Cup	Cheboksary	20 km	DNF
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Megan, born 18th August 1977, started her athletics career in the Under 8 division with the Frankston Little Athletics Centre. She met the walk in that first year and has been at it off and on since then. She had her first inter-venue competition as an Under 11 athlete and the records show she made State and came third in the final of the walk. Her age group was particularly tough, racing against Nicole Sansonetti, Simone Kuppler and Tracy Rosengrave. Megan comments that *“we all had some great races for the next few years until we finished LA's”*

Megan has always been a good runner and still competes in the Athletics Victoria winter cross country and road running season when time permits. To give an idea of the quality of her running, in her final year at school, she was cross country State champion, All Schools champion and won a team medal in the Victorian team at Nationals. She also played netball for Victoria on a number of occasions. But on each occasion, her love for walking has brought her back to the sport.

Her first coach was Sue Hughes, and she joined the Penport Walkers Club which was based on the Mornington Peninsula, initially just walking in club walks. It was not until the late 1990's that she decided to get serious. She had finished University and found that work didn't fulfil her competitive desire so she decided to intensify her training and her times started to come down. She needed a coach and looked to Mark Donahoo- *“Mark was a very good support to me during my early return to walking in the late 90's, and today I still apply theories I learnt from him”*.

The first time I really started to take notice of Megan was in the 2001/2002 summer season when she started to challenge the top girls in the State League competition, finishing the season with best times of **14:04** for the 3000m and **24:06** for the 5000m.

She had already walked a few seasons with the Victorian Race Walking Club but the 2002 winter season saw her road times improve and she had her first serious win as a senior walker, taking first place in the 10 km Lorna Carrington Trophy at the Racewalking Australia carnival in Ballarat with a time of **50:55**.

The next summer, her track times continued to come down and she finished the season with PBs of **13:35.6** for the 3000m and **23:42** for the 5000m. Overall, she finished second to Wendy Muldoon in our informal competition to determine the best State League walker.

Come the 2003 winter season and the good performances continued. She made her first trip to Canberra, competing in the 10 Mile walk around Lake Burley Griffin in the June carnival – and came third with an excellent **1:25:11**. She also reduced her 10 km time to **48:57** when taking silver in the Victorian 10 km roadwalking championship. But she also lost some training and racing time with hamstring problems that winter.

In the 2003/2004 Summer Season, she went one better and won the Wendy Muldoon Trophy as the top State League walker and Wendy was on hand to present the trophy. But her times were not as fast as the previous summer and she seemed to lack sparkle.



Wendy Muldoon presents Megan with her award as top walker in the 2003/2004 State League competition

The reason was soon obvious – Megan was pregnant. Her son Riley was born in August 2004, the very day that Nathan Deakes was walking the 50km event at the Athens Olympics. *“Funny as it sounds but from that day I vowed that I would get back to walking and make an Australian Team. I have found since having Riley I use my training time a lot more wisely and make every session count. He is my little inspiration.”*

True to her own private vow, Megan did return as a new and improved walker, tough as nails mentally as well as physically. But it did take a while and it was not until the 2005 winter season that she made her first tentative steps back into the racewalking world. She travelled to Canberra again, coming 6th in the 10 Mile walk in **1:26:01**. While her speed was lacking, she was obviously strong over the longer distances.

She joined Paul van Kopplen's squad and benefited from the strong training group that included Tom Barnes, Kellie Wapshott and Frank Bertei. When Paul stepped back and Frank took over the group, the momentum continued.

By the 2006 winter season she was in top form, knocking some 2 minutes off her PB in May with a time of **47:20** for the 10 km distance. She followed this up with her first ever Victorian gold medal in walking - 1st in the Victorian 15 km roadwalk at Geelong in **1:12:20**. Then in early July, she surprised some (but not all) with her time in winning the Victorian 20 km championship at Albert Park – **1:36:53**. She had announced her presence amongst our top 20 km walkers in the best possible way. She finished off the winter with her second Racewalking Australia carnival win, this time in Melbourne, with yet another 10 km PB time of **46:57**.

Her great season was rewarded with due recognition. The South Korean Athletic Federation had issued an all expenses paid invitation for two Australian walkers to compete in the Goyang International Racewalking Festival in Seoul in September and, on 4 days notice, she and Chris Erickson flew out of Melbourne bound for South Korea. Unfortunately, Megan was nursing a hamstring problem and had to slow in the 20 km race, finishing 3rd in **1:41:40**.



Megan races in Seoul in September 2006

2007 could not come soon enough and it proved to be her best year to date. She retained her Victorian 15 km roadwalking title with a time of **1:12:46** in May, then followed it up with times of **1:37:58** (20 km) and **46:30** (10 km PB) in early June. She then returned to Canberra but surprised by choosing to contest the 20 Mile event against the men – the result a fine 9th place with **2:53:01**. Two weeks later she showed her speed with a road 5 km time of **22:08** at Albert Park.

On 1st July, she defended her Victorian 20 km title with **1:36:55**, a significant time in that it made her one of four Australian women who had now qualified for the 2008 World Racewalking Cup. Her two final races for the winter were both wins – first place in the Racewalking Australian Carnival 10 km in Adelaide (**47:14** while struggling with a severe cold) and her first ever National Championship Gold medal (1st in the Australian 10 km roadwalking championship in Perth in **47:31**).

She showed her speed early in the summer with a 2000m time of **8:33.6** at Victorian Shield competition at Box Hill. The next day, she recorded **46:48** at Albert Park for a VRWC club 10 km event. With this promising early season form and with some solid longer training sessions under her belt, she had high hopes of a big 20 km time in December on the occasion of the Australian 50 km championship meet at Fawkner Park. Unfortunately, after taking it up to Claire Woods for 14 km, she was forced to retire.

She spent January in Canberra participating in an AIS training camp but was still struggling with niggling injuries and recorded a further DNF at the Canberra National Series 20 km at the end of her AIS stint. She had to bypass the Victorian Track championships as she tried to prepare for the Australian 20 km championships in late February. But on this occasion she did get to the start line and recorded a 16 second PB in coming 5th (4th Australian) in **1:36:37**.



Megan walked to a World Cup berth with her 1:36:37 at Fawkner Park in Melbourne in February 2008

This performance placed her as the 5th ranked Australian woman and put her in line for selection for the 2008 World Racewalking Cup. While most were confident that she had done enough for selection, the Athletics Australia selectors thought otherwise, only selecting the top 4 women. Megan contested the selections and was eventually successful, being added in late March.

As her final preparation before the World Cup, she travelled to Beijing as part of the Australian contingent to contest the IAAF Racewalking Challenge event. In oppressive conditions, she walked well to finish 19th in **1:39:33**. Then it was back home again for a few weeks before the trip to Russia. Unfortunately, things did not go well in the World Cup and she shows in the results as a DNF.

To her credit, she bounced back and was soon in winning form on the local Victorian front. She won the Victorian 15 km title in May (her third win in a row in that event) and won the Victorian 20 km title (again her third such win in a row) in late June in **1:38:10**. Unfortunately, she had to lower her guns to Cheryl Webb in the Australian 20 km winter championship in late August, recording **1:39:49** in a personally disappointing performance.

She had now achieved her first goal – she had indeed represented Australia. On top of that, she had an Australian title to her credit and a string of Racewalking Australia and Victorian gold medals in the display cabinet. But her potential was still not fully realized and many of us felt that she had much more to give if luck ran her way.

This soon proved correct. After battling injuries for most of the summer, Megan put it all together in March 2009 in the Australian Summer 20 km championship at Fawkner Park. The race itself was a high quality affair with 6 of the 7 finishers recording IAAF A or B qualifiers. Megan's fourth place (behind Cheryl Webb, Jess Rothwell and Claire Tallent) in a time of **1:33:45** was a 3 minute PB and cemented her place in the top echelon of Australian walking.

Unfortunately, fourth was one place too far back and the 3 available spots for the 2009 IAAF World Championships in Berlin went to Cheryl, Jess and Claire.

The 2009 winter season was a quiet one for Megan, with one standout walk, in the LBG Carnival 20 Mile Championship, where she recorded an excellent **2:49:54**.

In late 2009, she relocated to Adelaide with her young family. Although she continued to race with SARWC, her forays into national level walks were few and far between. She was now busy with family and work and had neither the time nor the energy to do the training needed to continue her career as an international walker.

Around this time, she was approached by Athletics Australia and offered the position of National Junior Walks Coach. She accepted the role, enthusiastically participating in the various underage camps and looking after the walkers at the various international meets to which Australia sent teams.



Team manager Megan with Rachel Tallent and Stephanie Stigwood at the 2013 World University Games in Kazan

In late 2014, she moved back to Melbourne with her family and re-entered the local Melbourne walking scene. A regular competitor now in VRWC and AV races, she is still able to produce quality walks, and she is one of the many former internationals who continue to give back to our sport after their retirement from the international ranks.

Megan's current PBs read well but I feel that there could have been more to come if the cards had fallen in a different order on occasions.

2000m	8.33	Box Hill	24/11/2007
3000m	13.08	Olympic Park	2007
5km	22.08	Albert Park	23/06/2007
10km	46.30	Albert Park	02/06/2007
20km	1.33.45	Fawkner Park	07/03/2009
20mile	2.49:54	Canberra, LBG	07/06/2009