

## REBECCA HENDERSON - OLYMPIC RACEWALKER

When Melbourne based racewalker Rebecca Henderson turned 20 on 4<sup>th</sup> July this year, she had more reasons to celebrate than nearly anyone else her age, as she had just been announced as a member of our Australian Olympic Team. Bec, born 4<sup>th</sup> July 2001, will contest the women's 20km walk in Sapporo on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> August.

Bec, who lives with her family in the outer eastern Melbourne suburb of Berwick, is one of that rare breed who has packed a huge amount into her first 20 years: a high achiever scholastically, a highly ranking triathlete and open water swimmer and, of course, one of our top racewalkers.

Like most of our top walkers, Bec was first introduced to athletics via our wonderful Australian Little Athletics organisation. She had attended her first Little Athletics day to watch her cousin compete. Thinking to herself that it looked like fun, she joined the Cardinia Little Athletics Club and has not looked back since then.

Her first State appearance was in the U9 1100m track walk at the 2010 Victorian Little Athletics T&F Championships at Olympic Park, Melbourne. There, she finished an inauspicious 9<sup>th</sup> with a time of **6:59**. Little did anyone realise at that stage what the future held for this tiny tot.

She had her first race with the Victorian Race Walking Club (VRWC) on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2010, coming 6<sup>th</sup> in the U12 2km with a time of **13:49**. She took membership with the club soon afterwards and became a regular walker at Middle Park. Bec soon realised that the longer the distance, the better she was, so she set her sights on becoming an endurance athlete.

She also started her swimming career about this time. While no one else in the family had any competitive swimming background, Bec had swum for as long as she could remember and loved the water. She joined the TigerSharks Swimming Club and quickly showed her talent in that sporting arena.

She was a vastly improved walker by the time the 2011 Victorian Little Athletics T&F Championships came around, finishing 3<sup>rd</sup> in the U10 1100m walk with **6:02**.



*August 2011 – a young Bec Henderson competing at Middle Park*

In 2012, she improved further, winning the Victorian Little Athletics T&F Championships U11 1500m walk with **7:45** and in 2013, she won the Victorian Little Athletics T&F Championships U12 1500m walk with **7:16**.

2013 was something of a breakthrough year from a racewalking perspective, with Bec winning the U12 2km roadwalk at the annual LBG Carnival in Canberra with an impressive **10:03**.

In the 2013/2014 summer season, she joined the Casey Cardinia Athletics Club and started to compete occasionally in the AV Shield competition, when she could fit it into her busy schedule of Little Athletics and swimming.

Her improvement continued, with her winning her third Victorian Little Athletics T&F title in March 2014, her time in the U13 1500m walk a PB **6:48**. She was duly selected in the Victorian team to compete in the Australian Little Athletics T&F Championship U13 1500m Walk, only to suffer a surprise disqualification, her first and only DQ to this day.

She quickly bounced back, recording a time of **58:10** in her first 10km roadwalk at Middle Park three weeks later – at 12 years of age! She was indeed showing a penchant for endurance.



*Bec completes her first 10km roadwalk at Middle Park in May 2014*

The 2014/2015 summer saw some great walking performances by Bec. In February, she won the Victorian T&F Championships U14 3000m walk in **14:41**, in mid March she won the Australian Junior T&F Championships U15 3000m walk with **14:29** and in late March she won her fourth Victorian Little Athletics T&F title, with a time of **7:03** in the U14 1500m walk.

Bec was already two-thirds of the way to becoming a triathlete, She was a strong swimmer and a great endurance runner/walker, so it was perhaps inevitable that at some time, she would jump on the bike. This she did in 2015, with immediate success. Her talent was spotted quickly, with Triathlon Victoria adding her to their development program. After only 5 races, she booked her place in the School Sports Victoria triathlon team.

Now she was even busier, with walking, triathlon and swimming, all at elite levels. Perhaps not surprisingly, her walk performances plateaued. She was now so busy on so many fronts that it was hard to push forward with her walking times.

However, in my Walker of the Year awards in December 2016, I still placed Bec 10<sup>th</sup> best performer in Australia. Here's what I wrote at that time.

15 year old Rebecca Henderson started her year brilliantly with two great performances in the Australian T&F Championships in Perth in March (1<sup>st</sup> in the U18 5000m with **24:57** and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the U16 3000m with **14:07**). She won again in the U16 3km (**14:08**) in the LBG Carnival in June and backed up for a silver in the Australian U16 5km Roadwalk Championship in Canberra in August (**25:38**). She produced a string of PB performances during the year, including **6:44** (1500m), **14:01** (3000m), **23:58** (5000m) and **49:55** (10km).

Her 2016/2017 summer saw her mixing all 3 disciplines, with her usual success. Consider:

- 27 Nov 2016 Walks 49:55 for 10km roadwalk in VRWC races at Middle Park
- 17 Dec 2016 Wins the Victorian 10km Open Water Swim title at Williamstown Beach
- 2 Jan 2017 Comes 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 1.4km Rip View Swim Classic at Point Lonsdale
- 14 Jan 2017 Wins the Open Division 2.5km Danger Swim at Torquay Beach, backing up later the same day to win the Danger 1000 swim
- 21 Jan 2017 Comes 11<sup>th</sup> in the Australian Youth Triathlon Series Meet, Robina, Gold Coast, QLD
- 27 Jan 2017 Comes 8<sup>th</sup> in the Australian 7.5km Open Water Championship in Adelaide

It's hard enough to train for one event so consider how you manage to train for racewalking, running, cycling and swimming (both short and long distance).



*Bec in 2016 in her many roles – triathlete, open water swimmer, walker*

Bec was first coached by **Karen Wynen** for a bit and then by **Mile Vasiljevic**. She moved to **Elke Raselli** when she was 12 or 13 and then to **Simon Baker's** group, where she has remained since. Simon's group has included most of our up and coming Victorian juniors at one stage or another – the names are many. To quote just a few: Kyle Swan, Reece and Hayden Walmsley, Stephanie and Hayley George, Adam Garganis, Philippa Huse, Brad Simpson, Jason Kozica, Simone McInnes and Pramesh Prasad.



*February 2017 at the Victorian Junior Championships – Simon Baker with some of his charges -Emily Noonan, Philippa Huse, Jemima Montag, Bec Henderson, Reese and Hayden Walmsley and Kyle Swan. Note 3 of our 2021 Olympians (Jemima, Bec and Kyle) are in this picture.*

Through the 2017 winter season and into the 2017/2018 summer, Bec committed more time to her walking, with a spot on offer in the U20 team in the 2018 Race Walking World Team Championships. She won gold in the 2017 Australian U18 5km Roadwalk Championship in August (**24:19**) and knocked out times of **1:18:52** (15km), **6:27** (1500m), **23:11**

(5000m) and **49:02** (10km) over the summer. Her consistent racing was good enough to secure her the third spot in the World Cup U20 Women's 10km team, alongside older team mates Philippa Huse and Katie Hayward.

She raced well in the Race Walking World Team Championships in Taicang, China, in May 2018, coming 16<sup>th</sup> with **49:25**. At only 16 years of age, she was one of the youngest walkers in the field.



*The U20 Women's team at the 2018 World Team Challenge – Katie Hayward, Bec Henderson and Philippa Huse*

She raced only sparingly through the rest of 2018 and 2019, as she concentrated on her school studies. Her efforts were rewarded when she completed her VCE at the end of 2019 as dux of Berwick College and won a place to study a Bachelor of Biomedical Science at Monash University in 2020.

Finally free of the burden of study, her walking blossomed over the 2019/2020 summer. Attending the Supernova Camp in Melbourne, she showed just how much she had improved with a time of **47:43** in a Supernova 10,000m Track Walk in late January. Two weeks later, she won the Oceania U20 10km walk championship in Adelaide in **48:23** and assumed the mantle of our top U20 female walker. Her selection for the 2020 World Junior T&F Championships looked all but certain and the year held great promise. Alas, covid-19 dictated otherwise and Australia went into lockdown. Bec did not race again until November 2020.

As she was to turn 20 in 2021, her junior career was now over and it was time to look to the open ranks and start planning for her first 20km. Brent Vallance had organised a summer of training for our aspiring walkers, starting with a December camp at Thredbo, followed by another camp in Melbourne in January.

In the 4 month period from January to May, Bec raced 6 times, for 6 PBs. Here's how they read

10 Jan 2021	Athletics Australia Elite 10,000m Track Walk, Melbourne	46:25
31 Jan 2021	Athletics Australia Elite 10,000m Track Walk, Melbourne	45:20
27 Feb 2021	Victorian Open 5000m Walk Championship, Melbourne	22:05
27 Mar 2021	Australian 20km Summer Championship, Melbourne	1:32:12
15 Apr 2021	Australian T&F Championships - Open 10,000m Walk, Sydney	45:13
02 May 2021	A.A. Invitational 20km Walk, Melbourne	1:31:53

There were no surprises when her name was announced as part of our Olympic team in early July. She would contest the Olympic women's 20km walk alongside Jemima Montag and Katie Hayward. She had certainly ticked all the boxes and well deserved her spot.

The Australian Olympic athletics team are now in a training camp in Cairns. Soon they will board the plane and fly to Japan. Then a short wait for Bec until her Olympic 20km appointment in Sapporo on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> August.





*Left: 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2021 – Bec Henderson, Jemima Montag and Katie Hayward fight out the A.A. invitational 20km walk at Fawkner Park in Melbourne. Bec's PB time of 1:32:53 helped secure her Olympic spot.  
Right: Bec Henderson and Katie Hayward hold up their boarding passes for Japan*

We congratulate Bec on all she has achieved so far in her short career and wish her and our other walkers all the best in Japan. For Bec, it's start of what we hope will be a long and stellar international career.

Tim Erickson  
Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> July 2021