

Rhydian Cowley

2008	Racewalking World Cup	Cheboksary	U20 10 km	39 th	45:24
2010	Racewalking World Cup	Chihuahua	U20 10km	15 th	46:57
2010	World Junior Champs	Moncton	U20 10,000m	17 th	44:49
2012	Racewalking World Cup	Saransk	Open 20km	87 th	1:32:28
2013	IAAF World Champs	Moscow	Open 20km	50 th	1:33:55
2014	Racewalking World Cup	Taicang	Open 20km	57 th	1:23:58
2015	World University Games	Gwanju	Open 20km	12 th	1:28:12
2016	Racewalking World Cup	Rome	Open 20km	39 th	1:23:21
2016	Olympic Games	Rio de Janeiro	Open 20km	33 rd	1:23:30
2017	IAAF World Champs	London	Open 20km	TBA	

Rhydian Cowley is one of four Victorian walkers who made their international debut in 2008. In Rhydian's case, he represented Australia in the Under 20 10 km roadwalk at the World Racewalking Cup in Cheboksary in Russia in early May.

Rhydian, born 4th January 1991, was 17 years of age and was a secondary school student at Melbourne Boys High School in inner Melbourne. He had consistently excelled in his under-age sporting pursuits and his 2008 representation came after nearly 10 years of involvement in the sport of racewalking.

His athletics career started with the Knox Little Athletics Club in the 1998/1999 summer season in the Under 8 division and it started with immediate success.

"I came second in my first walk race. And I'm quite sure that the other kid trained. I found it fun and there was a local coach, David Blackwood (father of Mark Blackwood), so Jordan (my twin brother) and I joined him and started training."

Like most young boys, he tried different sporting endeavours, all with success. He was just as good at running as at walking and he won the Rowville Little Athletics Centre 'Best Under 8' Award at the end of his first season. He also excelled at cross country running and was a keen basketball player.

In the next couple of years, his running and walking times plummeted.

"I started walking really good times that were pushing the state records. I was DQ'd at the region finals as an Under 9 but I went on as an Under 10 to win the State Championship and set a new Victorian record (5:09.12 for the 1100m walk). I didn't train as seriously after that for the rest of Little Aths, but I did win 4 consecutive State walk titles (U10-U13). This culminated in my appearance at ALAC (Little Aths National Championships, only happens for under 13's). There I was DQ'd in the walk, and finished 6th in the 1500 run."

As he reached the end of his Primary School years, he started transitioning to senior athletics, competing in some Athletics Victoria events and winning a number of Victorian underage State Titles. But finding that his times were not improving, and having DQ issues, he moved to a new coach, Ken Walters, and it proved to be a winning move.

It was at this time that he joined the Victorian Race Walking Club and experienced his first roadwalks. That first winter season saw him win the Victorian Under 14 3 km title in **15:52**. Come the summer season, he took bronze again in the 2004 Australian Schools championships, walking **15:05.13** for the Under 16 3000m track walk and then improved his time to **14:47.91** in winning the Victorian Under 16 3000m walk.

He dominated the local Victorian scene in the 2005 winter season, winning the Victorian Schools Under 16 5 km in **24:14** and the Victorian Under 16 5 km in **24:45**. He duly went into the National roadwalking championships in Adelaide as the firm favourite but, in what was the first of a string of unfortunate circumstances, he was forced to retire after contracting a severe head cold a few days before the big event.

Over the next 12 months, he continued on his merry way, winning title after title and generally reducing his times race by race. His big breakthrough walk came in July 2006 when he won the Victorian Under 16 5 km title in **23:47** and he travelled to Hobart to contest the Australian Under 16 5 km roadwalking title as favourite once again. But as in 2004, disaster struck and he was forced to retire with illness.



Rhydian in action in his first roadwalking season in 2005

Finally in December 2006, he arrived at the start line in an Australian championship in decent health. His gold in the Australian Schools Under 16 3000m track walk in **13:58.59** must have been a satisfying win. As the summer progressed, his 5000m time dropped until, in February 2007, he won the Victorian Under 20 5000m title in **22:20.81**.

Sometimes relatively insignificant events can have far reaching effects. Perhaps it was the following one for Rhydian.

I remember one night, I think it was in 2007, after a 5k for Premier League when 'the guys', Chris, Tom, Megan, invited me out to go and have a cool down walk with them. This was probably the first time I felt like I was part of the group of the best walkers in Victoria/Australia.

The momentum continued. In July 2007, he won the Victorian Under 20 10 km roadwalk in **50:05**. In September he won the Australian Under 18 8 km roadwalk in **37:56**. A week later, he won the Victorian Open 10,000m track walk in **50:09**. In October, he won the Victorian Schools Under 20 5000m walk in **22:05.44** and finally in December he won the Australian Schools Under 17 5000m walk in **23:08.55**.



Rhydian wins the Victorian U20 10 km roadwalk in July and the Victorian Open 10000m track walk in September 2007

If his progress had been good up till then, it now took off in another gear. A week after his win in the Schools championship, he recorded a huge 90 sec PB time of **46:42** in finishing second to Daniel Coleman in a 10 km roadwalk at Albert Park. He improved this to **46:37** in early January 2008, again at Albert Park. Then in early February,

he won the Victorian Under 20 5000m title in a 25 sec PB time of **21:41.36**, following this up with a 10 km roadwalk of **44:47** two weeks later at Fawkner Park in Melbourne.

Ranked as number 2 in the Australian Under 20 division, Rhydian travelled to Queensland in mid March with a fair degree of confidence. This was the big one – the 2008 Australian Under 20 10,000m championship was also the official trial for the World Junior and World Racewalking Cup – it all came down to one final race. He was up there early, going through the 4000m mark with Daniel Coleman in just over 22 minutes and feeling comfortable. However, by 4500m he was having abdominal spasms and had to stop. To his credit, he struggled on to finish in 5th place in **46:06**, a gutsy performance but well outside his Melbourne time of three weeks before. It was a bitter blow to him and he was now at the mercy of the selectors with regard to World Racewalking Cup selection.



Rhydian walks 44:47 at Fawkner Park in Melbourne in February 2008

Luckily for him, common sense prevailed. He had the times on the board and there were extenuating circumstances. Two weeks later when the World Cup team was announced, his name was one of three in the Under 20 men's event

His race at Cheboksary was excellent - 39th in **45:24** and the second Australian to finish. He had justified his selection and had produced the goods in the tough international arena.

Back in Australia, he now had to settle down to complete his final year of Secondary School education, so his remaining 2008 races were few and far between.

He spent January 2009 in Canberra at an AIS walking camp, gradually getting fit again. With this behind him, he started his 2009 campaign with two promising results in February - a win in the Victorian U20 5000m championship (**22:03**) and a solid **45:53** 10 km walk at Albert Park. In late March, he continued his build with a second placing (**46:13**) behind Dane Bird-Smith in the Australian U20 10000m title in Adelaide in windy and cold conditions.

His winter season saw him racing most weeks at Middle Park. Highlights included a strong 3rd place in the LBG U20 10km (a PB **44:57**), an inaugural **1:35:19** in the Victorian 20km championship 2 weeks later and 3rd in the Australian U20 10km in Sydney with **45:23**.

The 2009/2010 saw him chip away at his 10km times, first walking **44:41** at Middle Park in January and then walking **44:26** for 3rd place in the Australian U20 10km World Cup selection trial. His improvement continued a week later with a win in the Victorian U20 5000m track championship (a PB of **21:15**) and finished with 2nd in the Australian U20 10,000m track championship in Sydney with **43:22**.

With these walks, Rhydian earned spots in the Australian team to contest both the 2010 Racewalking World Cup in Chihuahua, Mexico, and in the 2010 World Junior Championships in Moncton, Canada.

His World Cup walk in Chihuahua was a good one, especially considering the very hot and humid conditions on the day. He was in fact the only one of the 3 Australians to finish the U20 10km walk, coming 15th with **46:57**. Back in

Australia, he won the LBG U20 10km championship in Canberra with a good **44:01**. But his World Junior Championship walk a month later in Moncton was once again a tough race in hot conditions and he struggled to 15th place with **46:57**.



Rhydian races with Regan Lamble in a 5000m in Vancouver before the 2010 World Junior Championships

That finished Rhydian's junior career. The next year he would be in the U23 division so his focus changed to 20km.

Having spent a lot of his time as a school student training on his own, preparing for the World Junior Championships in 2010 showed him the importance of having a training group. With this in mind, he took up the offer and joined David Smith's training squad in Brisbane. Over the next few years, he and Dane Bird-Smith were able to work well off each other and were able to keep breaking into senior teams.

The constant travel between Melbourne and Brisbane and the various overseas trips over the next few years did have implications on his university studies but he managed to balance it all out.

Fortunately a lot of university courses these days have material online, and allow for online assignment submissions, so while I couldn't attend classes while interstate I was still able to do uni work wherever I found myself in the world. The travel and training commitment meant that after somehow doing the first 2 years with a full time load, I progressively reduced my study load so I could fit everything in. Compared to some sports stories I've heard, the 6.5 years I took to complete my degree is comparatively fast, especially since the double degree usually takes 4 years.

He walked to 4th place in the Australian Open 20km Championship in Brisbane in August 2010 with **1:35:47**, followed by **1:31:26** in a VRWC race at Middle Park in October. Unfortunately he was a DNF in the invitational 20km walk at Fawkner Park in December but bounced back with **1:29:07** in the Australian 20km Summer Championship in Hobart in February 2011. In March 2011, he walked a huge PB of **19:58** in the AA Tour Meet in Sydney. He followed this up with 3rd in the MKR Hong Kong 10km in April in **44:43**.

All in all, his first few months with the Brisbane based squad had been successful.

He spent a lot of time in Brisbane that winter, training with Dane but racing only sparsely. He walked **1:30:54** in the Australian 20km Roadwalk Championship in Canberra in August followed by a PB **1:27:12** in the Fawkner Park 20km in December but then suffered in the horrendously hot conditions in Hobart in the Australian 20km Summer Championship in February to finish with **1:42:41**.

These performances were, however, good enough to earn him a vest for the 2012 Racewalking World Cup in Saransk. He seemed to be back on track with an excellent **1:27:21** in the IAAF Challenge Series 20km in Taicang in March and came to Russia in good shape. Unfortunately, he fell sick shortly after arrival and suffered during the race, finishing 87th with **1:32:28**.

Where to from here. He was a long way off Olympic selection and still struggled to achieve consistency in his races. He had two choices - knuckle down and improve or give it away. He chose the first option and settled down to work. His first real test was at the LBG Carnival in Canberra in June, where he won the 10 Miles Championship in a record **1:10:06**. Then he walked to a fine 2nd place behind Dane Bird-Smith in the Australian Roadwalk Championships in Adelaide in late August in a big PB of **1:24:34**. This came 2 weeks after a PB **40:38** for 10km in Brisbane. He was a new walker!

He knocked out some big track times over the summer (**5:29** for 1500m, **7:42** for 2000m, **11:39** for 3000m and **19:30** for 5000m) and walked a good race in the Australian Summer Roadwalk Championships in Hobart, coming 5th with **1:26:40**.

He headed off to Europe in late April 2013, putting in some good races - 7th in the Sesto San Giovanni 20km in Italy (**1:25:45**) and 14th in the IAAF Challenge Event in La Coruna (**1:24:22**).

Luck was on his side, with Chris Erickson and Jared Tallent both opting to walk the 50km in the 2013 World Championships in Moscow. This opened the door for Rhydian who was selected in the 20km team in late May.

But come August he had bad luck, picking up a gastro complaint at the team holding camp and quickly losing a couple of kilograms. This put paid to his race preparation and he walked a tired race in the IAAF World Championships in Moscow, coming 50th with **1:33:55**.

He had bounced back by the time the Australian Summer 20km Championships were scheduled in Hobart in early February 2014, taking 3rd with **1:26:49** and he improved further in the Racewalking World Cup 20km in May 2014, walking a PB **1:23:48** for 57th place in Taicang, China.



Rhydian contests the 2014 IAAF Race Walking Cup 20km in Taicang

He raced the rest of the winter season at home, finishing off in October with the 4 Day Lake Taihu Classic in China.

His racing over the 2014/2015 summer was sparse but included a couple of championship medals - 3rd in the Australian Summer 20km Championships in Adelaide with **1:28:06** and 2nd in the Australian 10,000m Track Championship in Brisbane in **42:29**.

He improved his 20km PB in La Coruna in Spain in early June 2015 with **1:23:27** and took 12th in the World University Games 20km in Gwanju, South Korea, with **1:28:12**. Yet another Australian Championship medal followed in August 2015 when he took silver in the national 20km title in Melbourne (**1:27:16**).

But it was at this time that Rhydian made a major decision

In 2015 there was a bit of a breakdown in the coach-athlete relationship between Dave and myself following the 20km nationals, so we went our own separate ways. I had some time to think about future coaches while travelling during the year, spending time in China, Spain and the UK. I ended up starting with Simon Baker's group in August/September, after having missed selection for the 2015 World Championships due to being the 4th fastest athlete behind Dane, Chris and Jared. The change was mainly due to the lure of regular face to face contact with my coach, and a regular training squad in the same city that I live in. I never really wanted to move to Brisbane, I just love being in Melbourne near friends and family too much.

Then it was off to Canberra for the first part of a two part training study being run at the AIS. It finally allowed him a structured training block and he came out of it to walk **1:24:35** in the Fawkner Park 20km in December. Then it was back to the AIS for the second part of the study before racing in the Australian Summer 20km Championship in Adelaide in February - his time in that race a huge PB of **1:22:07**.

He continued his good form with two very fast 5000m walks in the next few weeks - **19:43** to win the Victorian Track title, then **19:26** in the Melbourne Track Classic.

He needed to put further 20km times on the board to consolidate an Olympic spot and they were soon to come. First to Nomi in Japan in March where he walked **1:22:33**.

With his Olympic selection now confirmed, he headed to Flagstaff, Arizona, for a month of altitude training in April 2016. From there, it was straight to the Racewalking World Cup in Rome where he walked to 39th place with **1:23:21**.

Finally with proper funding as part of his Olympic preparation, he could travel to St Moritz for July. With this under his belt, his Olympic walk in August 2016 in Rio was another consistent performance - 33rd with **1:23:30**. This was definitely the most consistent series of races that Rhydian had put together and his Rio walk was definitely his best international walk to date.



Rhydian in action in the Rio 20km

The chance for a further AIS based camp in early 2017 proved just what the doctor had ordered and he was able to produce another top performance in the Australian Summer 20km Championship in Adelaide - a time of **1:22:09**. The announcement came quickly that he had been selected in the Australian team for the 2017 IAAF World Championships.

The last couple of years had been significant for Rhydian in terms of consistency of performance.

I had noticed a trend of getting sick before major races. It might have been a combination of bad luck, coming in tired and run down from a long season, or just not being overzealous enough with hygiene. In the last few years that's something I've tried to work on, just trying to manage things a bit better to reduce risk of illness. Never any guarantees, but I seem to have done a better job of being healthy on race day of late and it has reflected in my results. I've learned a lot since Cheboksary in 2008, and it'll be satisfying to keep putting that knowledge and experience to use in the coming years.

Way back in 2008 when I had interviewed him on the occasion of his first World Racewalking Cup selection, he had replied in part

I don't think there's much else that I can add apart from the fact that I'm hoping to get into the AIS sometime after I've finished school, and hopefully getting some more international appearances in the coming years, starting with World Juniors in two years time. Hopefully I can be ready for the Olympics by / in 2016.

Well, some of it came true. He did make the Rio Olympic team but his dream of an AIS scholarship was never realized due to the program shutdown after the 2012 Olympics.

It is a bit unfortunate that with the demise of the AIS walks program there isn't as clear a development pathway for walkers, and also reduced ability for a national walks coach to organise training camps and such like. In that respect it's really been up to the athlete and their coaches to commit to forging their own pathway through to the senior ranks. Without the AIS program, it's hard for athletes to really decide at what point they really want to invest their energies to making senior teams - it becomes a bit more of a rabbit hole that sucks you in steadily, rather than a decision you make when you sign on the dotted line.

The new National Athlete Support Structure (NASS) put in place by Athletics Australia only rewards those who are at the mandated international level. To get funding, you have to have the times already on the board. But how are you ever expected to get to that level with no financial help along the way. It is yet another variation of the old question - which comes first, the chicken or the egg?

The flawed design of the NASS system is clearly illustrated by reviewing Rhydian's last 2 years.

After missing the 2015 World Championships team (although he did compete at the Universiade in South Korea), Athletics Australia announced that he was to be dropped from the NASS funding scheme. Although he and his new coach Simon Baker fought back with a compelling case study, it was unsuccessful and Rhydian was on his own, losing his Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) membership and his NASS funding.

Fortunately, with some savings, with the two planned AIS training camps and with further financial help from his parents, he was able to pursue his Olympic preparation without reliance on NASS funding.

He headed to the AIS camp in November with no NASS funding and came back from it with NASS funding and support for 6 months instead of the usual 12 months. He was also given a target time of 1:21:45 which was at that stage nearly 2 minutes faster than his PB, and was out of sync with AA's own selection criteria by about 45 seconds.

Nevertheless he managed to get very close to that time in the National 20km Championship in February 2016, qualifying for the Olympics in the process. He did, however, have to wait until June to be selected, and in the interim he was back off funding for failing to meet that above mentioned qualifying time. Once he was selected in the Olympic team, he had preparation funding allocated and access to the VIS reinstated.

In the next round of NASS funding after the Olympics, he was dropped again and his access to the VIS was gone.

In February 2017 when he qualified for and was selected for the 2017 World Championships, his VIS access was reinstated and he was allocated some funding to help prepare for London. So, the financial tap is currently on just a little bit.

Rather than create certainty for athletes, such a funding model creates only confusion and disillusionment.

Rhydian's response illustrates everything that is currently wrong with the Australian T&F model.

I have begun working a full time job as of this week. I recognize that with funding being fickle, if I am to have a red hot go at the Tokyo Olympics I will need to have my own war chest built up so I don't have to rely on funding or fundraising. Additionally, I do need something to fall back on once I retire from international duties - it will

have to happen at some point.

I have great admiration for Rhydian who has had to do it on his own, in a post-AIS world in which athletes receive little real support from our governing body. His PBs are impressive

1500m	5:29	Melbourne, VIC	12/12/2012
3000m	11:33	Melbourne, VIC	14/02/2015
5000m	19:26	Brisbane, QLD	05/03/2016
10km	40:16	Brisbane, QLD	29/07/2012
20km	1:22:07	Adelaide, SA	21/02/2016

There is definitely more improvement to come but it will require more sacrifice and more dedication, in a system that is stacked against the individual.