

*Simon Baker*

1983	Racewalking World Cup	Bergen	20 km	14 <sup>th</sup>	1:24:42
1983	IAAF World Champs	Helsinki	20 km	29 <sup>th</sup>	1:28:09
1984	Olympic Games	Los Angeles	20 km	14 <sup>th</sup>	1:27:43
1985	World Student Games	Kobe	20 km	9 <sup>th</sup>	1:30:50
1985	Racewalking World Cup	Isle of Man	20 km	12 <sup>th</sup>	1:25:32
1986	Commonwealth Games	Edinburgh	30 km	1 <sup>st</sup>	2:07:47
1987	Racewalking World Cup	New York	20 km	11 <sup>th</sup>	1:21:57
1987	IAAF World Champs	Rome	20 km	24 <sup>th</sup>	1:27:32
1988	Olympic Games	Seoul	20 km	11 <sup>th</sup>	1:21:47
1988	Olympic Games	Seoul	50 km	6 <sup>th</sup>	3:44:07
1989	Racewalking World Cup	Barcelona	50 km	1 <sup>st</sup>	3:43:13
1989	World Indoor Champs	Budapest	5,000m	7 <sup>th</sup>	19:24
1990	Commonwealth Games	Auckland	30 km	7 <sup>th</sup>	2:19:55
1990	Goodwill Games	Seattle	20,000m	4 <sup>th</sup>	1:23:52
1991	Racewalking World Cup	San Jose	50 km	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3:46:36
1991	IAAF World Champs	Tokyo	50 km	DNF	
1992	Olympic Games	Barcelona	50 km	19 <sup>th</sup>	4:08:11
1993	Racewalking World Cup	Monterey	50 km	7 <sup>th</sup>	3:58.36
1993	IAAF World Champs	Stuttgart	50 km	14 <sup>th</sup>	3:57:11
1994	Commonwealth Games	Victoria	30 km	6 <sup>th</sup>	2:14:02
1996	Olympic Games	Atlanta	50 km	DQ	

Simon Baker, born 6<sup>th</sup> February 1958, started his walking career early as a promising Little Athlete, his best performance at that level being a win in 800m walk in the inaugural Australian Little Athletics championship in Melbourne in 1970 (see cutting below)



From there he moved into the Junior ranks of the Victorian Amateur Athletics Assn, representing the Oakleigh Club and further developing his developing his racewalking skills.

His Junior career culminated with a win in the Australian Junior 3000m Title in 1976 in **13:37** but he had to wait a number of years before he emulated this success in the senior ranks. Even in his early days as a senior, he was known as a fierce track competitor and Interclub races against him were always tough. But he was predominantly a track walker and the road did not seem to appeal to him as much.

Finally in 1983 he started to achieve some success on the road. During that winter season, he was 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Victorian 10 km walk (**45:07**), and in the Victorian 15 km walk (**1:04:20**) and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Victorian 20 km walk (**1:28:51**). People started to sit up and take notice of this tall lean walker with the long stride and fluent action. A fine 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Australian 20 km title in Adelaide in **1:28:00** gained him his first international vest and a place in the Lugano Cup 20 km team.

His walk in Bergen in the World Walking Championship 20 km was inspirational. His time of **1:24:42** was a PB by over 3 minutes and his placing of 14<sup>th</sup> was outstanding.

He was also selected to represent Australia in the 1983 IAAF World Championship 20 km event in Helsinki but his long season took its toll and he finished 29<sup>th</sup> in **1:28:09**.

In 1984 he started the year well with 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Victorian 5000m track title (**20:21**) behind speedster Andrew Jachno and then took 3<sup>rd</sup> in the National 5000m title in **19:57**. This was followed by a fine 2<sup>nd</sup> in the Victorian 10 km walk (**42:28**) and his first Victorian Open title with a fine win in the Victorian 15 km in **1:02:29**. He then fronted for the Australian 20 km title and Olympic trial. Here he finished 3<sup>rd</sup> behind Smith and Sawall in **1:25:06** to gain his first Olympic berth.

He celebrated his selection by winning the LBG 20 mile walk in Canberra in **2:28:00**.

His Olympic walk was a repeat of his 1983 Lugano Cup walk – 14<sup>th</sup> place. His time of **1:27:43** reflected the hotter conditions. In the space of 2 years, Simon had come out of nowhere and was now amongst our top walkers.

In 1985, he accepted an AIS scholarship. For the rest of his international career, he retained that scholarship. When he finally made the transition to AIS coach in 1994, he had spent 10 years training in Canberra.

He won the 1985 Victorian 5000m walk in **20:13** and then came 2<sup>nd</sup> to Dave Smith in the National track title in **20:12**. Then he won his first ever Australian Open title, the 20 km, in **1:26:09**. This gained him selection to his second Lugano Cup, to be held in Isle of Man.



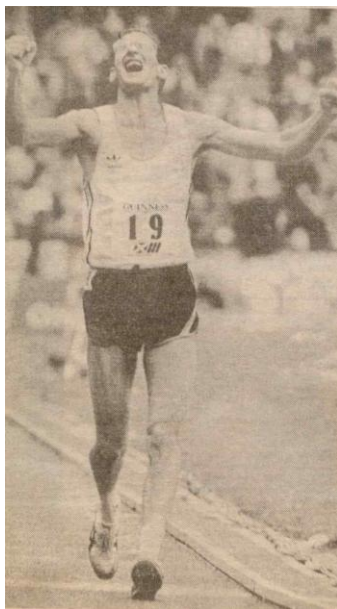
**Simon is shown in his first international event – the 20 km walk in the Racewalking World Cup in 1983. He finished 14<sup>th</sup> in 1:24:42.**

Gaining fitness with his full time training regime in Canberra, he retained his LBG title in **2:31:02**, then headed off to England where he finished the 20 km World Walking Championship in **1:25:30** for an improving 12<sup>th</sup> place. He was fast gaining the reputation as a big time performer.

1986 was the Commonwealth Games year and Simon had big plans. He started well with 2<sup>nd</sup> in **19:46** in the Australian 5000m track title behind Dave Smith. Then in May he was 2<sup>nd</sup> to Dave Smith in the trial for the 1986 Commonwealth

Games 30 km, held at the AIS in Canberra. Dave's time (2:05:59) made him a clear favourite for the gold but Simon's time in the trial (2:09:20) was also a big PB and put him in medal contention.

When Dave was forced to withdraw just before the Commonwealth Games race, Simon made the most of his opportunity and walked an unforgettable race in the dreadful Edinburgh conditions to win in a Games Record (and yet another PB) of 2:07:47. The event, which was broadcast live on Australian television, saw Simon take the lead at the 14.5 km mark and power home through the driving rain to win by over a minute. He celebrated his win with a victory leap past the finishing line and a victory lap – you would rarely see a more excited winner. Overnight he became a household name in Australia.



**Simon celebrates his win in the 1986 Commonwealth Games 30 km**

1987 started in the usual way with yet another 2<sup>nd</sup> place (20:26) behind Dave Smith in the National 5000m title. He had his third LBG 20 mile win in 2:25:18 and improved his Racewalking World Cup placing in New York to 11<sup>th</sup> with a PB time of 1:21:57. Yet another international race and yet another PB – and the fastest time recorded by an Australian at the Lugano Cup.

But like 1983, his tough regime of racing and training took its toll and his subsequent performance in the 20 km at the IAAF World Champs in the heat of Rome was a slightly lower but still good 24<sup>th</sup> in 1:27:32.

Up till now, Simon had always looked upon himself as a 20 km walker but his coach Craig Hilliard felt it was time to move up to the 50 km distance. October 1987 saw him attempt his first 50 km in Germany. His time of 4:04:30 was a very good first up effort and broke the Australian Olympic qualifying standard.

He improved his 50km time in the VAWC Christmas 50km event at Albert Park on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1987, winning with 3:58:51. He had now broken the 4 hour barrier.

In 1988 Andrew Jachno moved to the AIS and the new training partnership benefited both walkers. Simon started the year in fine style, finally breaking through for a win in the National 5000m track title in 19:40 and then winning the Olympic 20 km trial in emphatic style. He followed this up with his fourth LBG 20 mile win in 2:27:37, a win in the Victorian 20 km walk in 1:24:22 and a win in the National 20 km title in 1:21:19 in August. He did not contest the 50 km trial but his 1987 debut time was good enough to gain him Olympic selection.

His tough task – to walk both the 20 km and 50 km event in Seoul – was not easy but the way in which he executed it left no doubt about his real walking capabilities. His 11<sup>th</sup> place in the 20 km event in 1:21:47 was outstanding but this was overshadowed by his 6<sup>th</sup> place in the 50 km walk. Journalist Len Johnson described his finish in the 50 km event as “*the excited extrovert who spent the 10 minutes after crossing the line falling around like a puppet dangling on tangled strings, joyously celebrating his own performance with every other walker in sight*”. The time of 3:44:07 was a PB and a new Commonwealth best.

This performance showed the two sides of Simon – the hard working athlete who had assiduously trained to achieve his high ranking and the eccentric extrovert. But it worked and he was able to get a lot of good publicity for racewalking.

Coming back from his Olympic success, he fronted for the VRWC 2 hour walk at the Collingwood track on August 20 and set a new National 1 hour record of **14.475 km**.

In 1989, Simon's form was superb and great things were expected. He successfully defended his Australian 5000m track title in **19:38** in March and was 7<sup>th</sup> in the World Indoor Champs in Budapest in **19:24**, yet another PB. Then he won the Victorian 10 km title in **41:31** before travelling to Europe to prepare for the World Walking Championships. In a warmup 10 km event in Hidesheim in Germany, he recorded **39:56** for 2<sup>nd</sup> place to Russian Waldas Lozlauskas.

Came the World Walking Championship in Barcelona in May and Simon was in the best form of his career. His plan was to sit with the leaders until half way and then apply pressure and he executed his plan perfectly. On the 13<sup>th</sup> lap of the 25 lap course, he surged to the lead and increased his pace. Within 2 laps, he had a lead of 20-25 seconds. Out in front, Simon just concentrated on his technique while behind him the leading pack gradually fragmented as it unsuccessfully chased him. With 2 laps to go, the lead had increased to 80 seconds and the chasing pack was broken.

Simon's finishing time of **3:43:13** bettered his Seoul time by over a minute. Russian Andrey Perlov, the world's fastest in 1987, was 2<sup>nd</sup> in 3:44:12. Of the finishing stages of the race, Simon said *"By the finish of the race, because it was the Russians who were chasing me, just about the whole crowd was yelling at me to keep going. It was quite emotional in the last two laps with all the cheering and support there. That just kept pushing me through."*

His final comment summed it all up perfectly. *"You work very hard and every now and then in your life there is a little bit of magic."*



### **Simon wins the 1989 Racewalking World Cup – a first for Australia**

He returned to Australia but not to rest. He was 2<sup>nd</sup> to Andrew Jachno in the Victorian 20 km title in **1:23:25** and won the National 50 km title in **3:57:36** in August. Then in late 1989 at the Commonwealth Games 30 km trial in Melbourne, Simon and Andrew crossed the line together in **2:10:52** in what was regarded as a training session.

Unfortunately a pinched sciatic nerve and a virus ruined Simon's chances in Auckland and he crawled home in the January Commonwealth Games race in 7<sup>th</sup> place in **2:19:55**. He would have been excused for not walking but his pride did not permit such a thing.

The rest of 1990 was a gradual rebuilding exercise. He finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the National 5000m track title in **20:36** then travelled overseas. At the prestigious eight-nation match in Germany, he showed he was back on track with a fine 2<sup>nd</sup>



place behind the 1988 Olympic silver medallist Ronald Weigel. He also won the Victorian 15 km walk in **1:02:22** and placed 3<sup>rd</sup> behind Jachno and A'Hern in the National 20 km race (**1:22:38**). He was also invited to walk in the prestigious Goodwill Games being held in Seattle in Canada. There in searing 40<sup>o</sup>C heat, he finished 4<sup>th</sup> in the 20,000m track walk in **1:23:53**, beating a number of the top international walkers.



### **Simon was front page news in Australia after his wonderful performance in Barcelona in 1989**

He finished off the winter season in great form in September, slashing the Commonwealth and National 50 km track record in winning the Victorian title at the Box Hill track. He cut a massive 22 minutes off Englishman Chris Maddock's 1984 record of 4:05:47, finishing in **3:43:50**. It was the fastest 50 km for the year and less than 2 minutes outside Raul Gonzalez's world record. In this walk, he broke 4 Victorian and Australian records - his 25 km time of **1:52:24** (this broke Ted Allsopp's famous 1956 record), his 30 km time of **2:14:22**, his 40 km time of **2:57:57** and of course his 50 km time of 3:43:50.

Simon's chances of competing in the 1991 World Indoor Championships went out the door when he broke his collarbone after being knocked off his bike near the AIS after winning an Interclub 5000m walk.

In the Racewalking World Cup 50 km event in Barcelona, great pressure was on Simon as defending champion and he did not disappoint - his 2<sup>nd</sup> place in **3:46:36** was another outstanding pressure walk. In a bizarre finish, Simon had been dropped from the leading pack of 5 walkers late in the race and crossed the line in 3<sup>rd</sup> place but was ultimately promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> as 3 Soviet walkers were disqualified. The event was won by Mexican Carlos Mercenario in 3:42:03. The second Soviet disqualification had been the most sensational with Andrey Perlov physically removed from the course within metres of the finish after ignoring the chief judge's efforts to inform him of his disqualification a kilometre earlier. It was yet another quality 50 km performance by Simon.

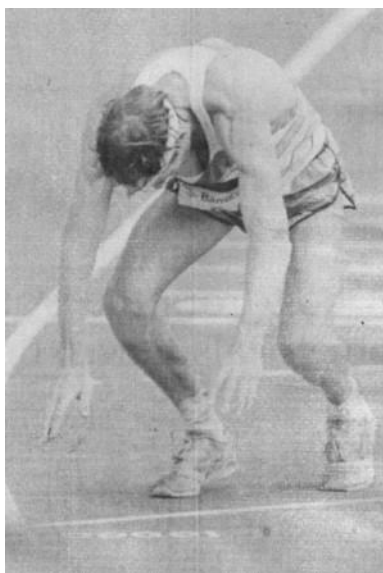
With this performance under his belt, Simon was confident of doing well in the IAAF World Championship walk in Tokyo but once again he faced disappointment - his first disqualification in 14 international races.

As 1992 started, he put this setback behind him and focused on the forthcoming Olympics. Preselected for the 50 km event, he had a comfortable win in the Olympic 20 km trial in March. After trailing Dave Smith and Nick A'Hern early, he stormed home to win by nearly a minute in **1:22:16**. A few days later he finished 2<sup>nd</sup> to Nick A'Hern in the National 5000m track title in **19:47**. He now had the option of both events for the Olympics. Predictably, he chose to concentrate on the 50 km event and forgo the 20 km.

To cap of this wonderful period, AA managing director Neil King announced in April that Simon was the recipient of the prestigious E.H. Flack award for distinguished services to Australian Athletics. He was only the seventh recipient of this prestigious award.

He must have been on a high as he set forth for Europe once again. There he recorded **2:07:43** in a 30 km race in Milan in May and backed up a week later for **1:23:09** in a 20 km race in Norway – he was in good shape and things looked promising for the Barcelona Olympic 50 km.

Alas, it was not to be. In the oppressive Spanish heat, he struggled to 19<sup>th</sup> place in a slow (for him) time of **4:08:11**. He raised his arms as he crossed the line and then collapsed five meters further in and was carried off on a stretcher. His coach Craig Hilliard, who hurried to the medical centre, said Simon looked like a body fresh from the morgue.



#### **Simon collapses to the ground after finishing the 1992 Olympic 50 km walk – the effort all too obvious**

Simon quickly recovered and, when interviewed later, said “*I’ve never suffered pain for that long in a race before.*” The gold went to Perlov of Russia while Poland’s Robert Korzenioski, who went on to become the world’s greatest walker with 4 Olympic walking gold medals, was disqualified at 49 km while in second place.

The rest of 1992 was spent training quietly in Canberra and he had his first post-Olympic hitout in December when the Racewalking World Cup trial was held in Melbourne. There, he overcame hot weather to win in **4:05:08**. He had been on 3:50 pace early but faded in the tough conditions. But it signalled he was getting back into shape and it was not surprising when he came a great 7<sup>th</sup> (out of 99 starters) in the Racewalking World Cup in Monterey in **3:58:36** in horrendously hot conditions. He then backed this up with another quality performance in his fourth IAAF World Championship, finishing 14<sup>th</sup> in **3:57:11**.

Simon was keen for another Commonwealth Games so, without much rest, he fronted for the trial at the Gold Coast in April 1994. He finished 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 30 km trial in **2:15:50** to win selection to his third Commonwealth Games to be held in Victoria in Canada. This was his last big international race as an AIS scholarship holder and he struggled home for 6<sup>th</sup> place in **2:14:02**. The writing was on the wall and later that same year, he resigned his AIS scholarship as an athlete and took up an assistant coaching position there. He was still racing but not with the same fire as previously.

He worked alongside Craig Hilliard for a number of years before returning to Melbourne to pursue his career outside athletics. His final throw of the dice was in 1996 when he was selected for his fourth Olympic Games, this time in Atlanta. Unfortunately it was a disappointing meet for Simon- he was disqualified in the 50 km walk, only the second DQ in his long and illustrious international career.

In finishing this review of Simon's international racewalking career, it would be remiss of me if I did not mention the fact that he was a regular Team Captain in Olympic, World Championships and World Walking Cup teams from 1988 to 1996. This fact illustrates the high esteem in which he was held by fellow athletes and sporting administrators alike.

His subsequent time in Melbourne has been busy from both professional and sporting perspectives. He now works as a senior hydrologist with the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, a demanding role that takes much of his time. Yet he continues to coach and to contribute on so many levels within our sport.

- He was co-founder of the Athletics Australia Athletes Commission and was Chair from 1992 - 1997
- He was on the Athletics Australia Board from 1993 to 1996.
- He has been an Athletics Australia selector.
- He was 1 of 2 Oceania representatives on one of the IAAF Commissions from 1991 to 2001.
- He has coached a large number of our top walkers, including the likes of Duane Cousins, Jess Rothwell, Regan Lambie and more recently Rhydian Cowley, Kyle Swan, Adam Garganis and Jemima Montag. His own Melbourne based coaching group continues to be keenly sought by many of our up and coming walkers.
- He runs a regular 2 week summer training camp at Falls Creek and it regularly attracts walkers from around Australia and overseas.
- Has regularly coordinated and run Australian Track & Field Coaches Association and Athletics Australia racewalk coaching courses and written articles for the "Modern Athlete and Coach", the Australian Track & Field Coaches Association Journal.

Few people in the Australian racewalking community have contributed for such a long time and at such a high level as Simon. It was no surprise when he was awarded an Order of Australia (OAM) in the 2018 Australia Day Honours List.

Finally, let me try to put Simon's racewalking career in perspective.

Simon ranks alongside Nathan Deakes and Jared Tallent as one of our three best performed male walkers ever. His impressive resume includes representations in 4 Olympics, 4 World Championships, 3 Commonwealth Games, and 6 World Walking Cups. He was Commonwealth Champion over 30km in 1986, Racewalking World Cup winner over 50 km in 1989 and still holds the Commonwealth 50 km track record.

His PBs have stood the test of time and still rank him amongst our top walkers

3000m	11.26.0	Solleftuna, Sweden	07/07/1989
5000m	19:24.12	Budapest, Hungary	05/03/1989
10km	39.50	Canberra	27/08/1988
20km	1:21.19	Canberra	27/08/1988
30km	2:06:39	Melbourne	07/05/1989
50km	3:43:13	L'Hospitalet, Spain	28/05/1989