

TAYLA-PAIGE BILLINGTON

2014	World Junior Championships	Eugene	10,000m	18 th	48:40.0
2016	Racewalking World Cup	Rome	U20 10km	14 th	47:41
2016	World Junior Championships	Bydgoszcz	10,000m	19 th	48:32.3

It was not surprising that Tayla-Paige Billington took up racewalking, given that her mother Jenni Jones-Billington, had been one of our top female exponents, representing Australia in the 1993 World Cup and then subsequently representing New Zealand in the 1995 World Cup.

Tayla was born 30th March 1997 when Jenni was resident in New Zealand. They eventually moved back to Australia in 2000, settling in Sydney where Jenni had competed as a junior. Retiring in 2002, Jenni started coaching, mainly in the running sphere, with a number of National 400m runners to her credit. And of course, she had a very talented young daughter in Tayla on whom to focus her attention.

A member of Manly Warringah Centre from a young age, Tayla followed in her mum's footsteps, winning all the NSW LA titles on her way up through the ranks.

Tayla first came to my attention in August 2008 when the Australian Roadwalk Championships were held in Melbourne. She took second in her age group Australian Cross Country championship on the Saturday, came third in the Australian U14 3km roadwalk on the Sunday (even though only aged 11) and then ran in the Australian Schools cross country relays on the Monday. Her 3km walk time of **15:20** (behind Amy Bettiol 14:39 and Elizabeth Hosking 14:54) was impressive for one so young.

Over the next couple of years, she confirmed her potential with more good performances at the National level. She was second in the U14 2km roadwalk at the LBG Carnival in Canberra in June 2009 (**10:00**), second at the Australian Schools U14 1500m trackwalk in December 2009 (**7:01**), second again at the U15 1500m walk at the National T&F Titles in March 2010 (**7:02**) and then came third in the Australian Little Athletics T&F Championships 1500m track walk in Brisbane in April 2010 (**7:08**). As an aside, Jenni and Tayla became the first parent/child combination from the Manly Warringah Centre to represent NSW at the Australian LA Championships, Jenni in 1978 and Tayla in 2010. Both had excellent 1500m run / 1500m walk combinations and both competed in the double at these champs (Tayla has an 800m run PB of 2:11).

Alas, it was at this time that Tayla shot up in height over a short period of time, making her a prime candidate for Osgood-Schlatter syndrome. And this is what happened, as she battled the painful knee condition for the next 2 years. She did not race at all in 2011 and, even though she had a small number of races in 2012, she struggled. It was not until December 2012 that she finally started to overcome the pain and discomfort, coming second in the Australian Schools U18 5000m track walk in a promising **25:49**.

On the basis of this walk, she was selected to walk in the Australian Youth Olympics team, coming third in the Youth Olympics 5000m walk in Sydney in January 2013 in a PB **25:26**. Two months later, she won the U18 5000m walk at the Australian T&F Championships in Perth in another PB time of **24:40**. Alas, then it was a case of having the winter off with further niggles and health issues. She finally got back to the start line in September 2013 for the Australian roadwalk championships in Launceston, coming second in the U18 5km in **25:02**, much slower than her time in March but at least promising.

Jenni then made a strategic move, deciding to move to Melbourne with Tayla so that she could leverage off the strong Victorian walking environment. Setting in Melbourne and joining the Box Hill Athletics Club, Tayla continued her return to top form, now finally free of injury and ready to train and race. She won the 2013 Victorian Schools U18 5000m in October with **24:48** before travelling to New Zealand where she won the NZ 10km Junior Championship in Auckland with a very good first up time of **50:41**. Like her mother Jenni, she now had a NZ championship win to her credit.

December 2013 saw two very impressive walks – first in the Australian Schools U18 5000m in Townsville (in hot conditions) in a PB **24:01**, followed a week later by a win in the Junior 10km at Fawkner Park in Melbourne, another big PB of **49:08**.



Tayla goes straight to the lead in the Australian Schools U18 5000m in Townsville in Dec 2013

She now had her sights firmly set on representing Australia in either the 2014 IAAF World Cup or the 2014 IAAF World Junior Championships – she had the times on the board and was in top shape. Alas, the best laid plans can go awry and they certainly did. She felt tired and could not muster the energy to race – tests showed a dangerously low iron count in the blood. She was a DNF in the World Cup trial in Hobart in February, struggled with slow times in the Victorian track championships and then crashed out in the Australian U20 10,000m track walk championship (the official World Juniors trial), finishing 9th in 55:08.

It was not until the end of May that she finally started to come good, recording **24:17** for a VRWC club 5km at Middle Park and then winning the U18 5km roadwalk at the LBG Carnival in Canberra with **24:26**. The Australian selectors took a punt and selected her as one of 2 female walkers (along with Jasmine Dighton) to compete in the IAAF World Junior championships and it looked like she was coming good just in time. And so it proved, her walk in Eugene (USA) in late July a PB **48:40** and 18th place.



Tayla competes in the 2014 IAAF World Junior Championships in Eugene

2015 was another good year with Tayla winning all the big titles – the Victorian U20 5000m Track Championship (**23:57**), the Australian U20 10,000m Track Championship (**50:11**), the LBG U20 10km Road Championship (**49:36**) and the Australian U20 10km Road Championship (**49:32**).



Tayla wins the Australian U20 10km roadwalk in August 2015 – an Australian champion like her mother Jenni

Aged only 18, Tayla was eligible for the 2016 World Junior Championships 10,000m track walk and the 2016 IAAF World Racewalking Cup U20 10km road walk so she prepared for the two trials. The first to come around was the World Racewalking Cup trial in February 2016 in Adelaide and she did not disappoint, coming 3rd in a PB **47:25**. This secured one of the 3 spots for that team. Just over 2 weeks later, she won the Australian U20 10,000m Track Championship in Perth with **47:47.49**, thus securing her World Junior Championships team spot.

Her walk in the World Cup in Rome was a good one as she finished 14th with **47:41**. Her walk in the World Junior Championships in Bydgoszcz was just as good - 19th with **48:32.33**.



Tayla (number 20) competes in the 2016 IAAF World Junior Championship 10,000m walk

On their return from overseas, Jenni and Tayla packed their bags for yet another move, having decided to relocate back to Queensland for the consistently warmer weather.

In March 2017, Tayla celebrated her 20th birthday, so must now race the 20km distance. She has yet to make her debut so we wait with interest to see what sort of mark she can set initially.

We were very pleased to have had her resident here in Melbourne from 2016 to 2016 and to have had her represent

Australia as a Victorian.

Her PBs show potential but are really just the tip of the iceberg.

2000m Track Walk	09:08	AV Shield, Casey Park, Melbourne	31/10/2015
3000m Track Walk	14:26	AV Shield, Casey Fields, Melbourne	23/11/2014
5km Road Walk	22:50	VRWC, Middle Park	23/04/2016
10km Road Walk	47:25	Oceania U20 Championship, Adelaide	21/02/2016

I wait excitedly for the next installment.