

## CLAIRE WOODS – 2008 OLYMPIAN

When Athletics Australia announced the 2008 Australian Olympic team in March, two names appeared for the first time – Kellie Wapshott and Claire Woods. Both girls had walked alongside each other for the entire 20 km trial event at Fawkner Park in Melbourne and it was only in the final kilometre that Kellie was able to create a winning gap. With only 5 seconds separating the girls, it was fitting to see both selected for their first Olympic representations.

Since I have previously written about Kellie in *Heel & Toe*, it is time to balance the books and bring readers up to date on Claire's background and career.

Claire, born 6<sup>th</sup> July 1981 in Adelaide, is currently 26 years of age and was born in the same year as both Kellie Wapshott and Chris Erickson. Her sporting career started in little Athletics which she took up at 11 years of age, initially focusing on the middle distance events. Once started, she progressed quickly and, within a year, she had qualified for the State Finals in the walk as well as the distance events and managed to pick up a bronze medal. A year later, she joined John Pearce's (Paige Hooper's coach) Enfield Harriers training squad.

*“At that time I was running twice a week and still competing in LA's. After running for Enfield Harriers throughout the season, it came to interclub finals, and as I had done little athletics I was required to do the walk. I don't remember what I walked, but it must have been ok. Fortunately for me Winter Nationals were in Adelaide in 1995, and after my walk at interclub finals, Roy McFadden asked me if I would like to come out to Walkers Club and try to qualify to make the SA team. I think I walked around 30 mins for my first attempt at 5km and made my first South Australian team. I competed at Nationals that year, coming around 17<sup>th</sup> or third to last, but I was excited to be in the South Australian team. From there, I made my first All Schools team at the end of 1995 and came well back in the field. I never raced at any more State individual championships for LA's as they always coincided with National championships. Training two nights a week, my breakthrough year came in 1996 where I collected my first national medal. Finishing third behind Renee McGaskill and Alanna McIllevie and ahead of Kellie Wapshott (in 4<sup>th</sup>) in the U16 5 km walk at the Australian roadwalking championships at Albert Park in a time of **25.30**, I beat my more fancied South Australian team mates to pick up the team silver medal. That year I also made the state cross country team, and continued to do so for the remaining two years of school.”*

From then on, she was pretty much undefeated in South Australian events and, in 1998, won her first national title in the Australian Under 18 8 km roadwalk with **42:41**. She followed this up in 1999 with 2<sup>nd</sup> behind Kellie Wapshott in the Under 20 10 km roadwalk championship with **52:40**. She also did well on the track, winning silver and bronze at the 1997 All Schools championships in Hobart and bronze in the 1998 All Schools championships in Canberra. In October 1998, she also represented Australia at the World School Games in Shanghai alongside fellow walkers Erica McGinniskin, Daniel Vellis and Douglas Connolly, finishing 9<sup>th</sup> in her event.

Thus she finished her final year of school as one of our top female juniors but, like so many promising walkers of that age, she did not kick on as perhaps expected.. She walked for another year or so before giving the sport away in early 2000. In the next year and a half she participated in many different sports in a social setting, including touch football, beach volleyball, netball and slightly more competitively in the North Adelaide women's football team (where the team won back to back premierships). In mid 2001 her competitive nature got the better of her and she decided to take up walking again. She competed at walkers club, and two weeks later found herself "making up the women's team" at the LBG walking carnival in Canberra. There she finished 5<sup>th</sup> in the Open Women's 5000m walk in **26:05** and was the first South Australian to finish.

She continued to train three times a week at Enfield Harriers and, in late 2001, was asked if she would like to consider applying for an AIS developmental scholarship. At the end of 2001 she completed her degree in Human Movement and moved to Canberra to live with her aunt and begin training with the AIS squad. This was obviously a huge change, although AIS coach Ron Weigel had provided her with a training program for around 8 weeks before relocating.

On 4<sup>th</sup> January 2002, she commenced her AIS scholarship, starting on no less than 175 km for the first week of January. The next four weeks were all around this mark, somewhere between 175-185 km per week. As a result of this training she improved very quickly. At 20 years of age, and after only 6 weeks on scholarship, she recorded a PB of **46.46** for the 10000m track walk at the Canberra A Series meet. She followed this up with **47:59** in the Hobart Grand Prix 10000m track walk a few weeks later. Unfortunately the high volume of training came at a cost – she developed tendonitis in her foot and could only struggle to 5<sup>th</sup> place in the Australian 20 km roadwalking championship in April in Brisbane, her time a relatively slow **1:43:56**.

Later that year, the AIS squad travelled to Mexico for a block of altitude training. After returning home and just turning 21, she walked **1:37:13** at a race in Melbourne in cold and wet conditions. This time qualified her for the 2002 World Racewalking Cup in Italy later that year, but Athletics Australia subsequently denied the inclusion of her, Cheryl Webb and Natalie Saville in the team, opting to take only one female walker - Jane Saville.

She was selected in the World University Games team to compete in Dageu, Korea, but she never made it there. After Ron Weigel left the AIS toward the end of 2002, the AIS walks squad was left without a coach and was supported primarily by athletics administrator Louise Mogg. This was a tumultuous period for Claire where she suffered from an oesophagael ulcer and poor form. It was some time before she finally turned things around.

After resigning her AIS scholarship at the end of 2003, she stayed on in Canberra as she had secure work. When Brent Vallance eventually took up the scholarship coaching position, she began to focus once again on making a World Racewalking Cup team. In a nail biting finish, she took 5<sup>th</sup> at the 2004 National 20 km championship in **1:38:25**, five seconds under the WWC qualifying standard. Claire had made her first Australian senior team. At the WWC in Naumburg, she finished 42<sup>nd</sup> in a PB of **1:35:25**.

2005 was a quiet year in which Claire competed infrequently. She did win the NSW 20 km roadwalking title at Chipping Norton in 1:36, a time which qualified her for the next World University Games. But once again, she did not compete. Her partner, Jared Tallent, had made his first World Championships and she had already booked her flights to watch him compete. Back from Europe, she contested the Australian 10 km roadwalking championship in Adelaide in late August, coming 3<sup>rd</sup> in **48:54**.



**The placegetters in the 2005 Australian 10 km roadwalking championships – all 3 girls will be at the 2008 World Cup – Kellie Wapshott and Claire as walkers and Simone Wolowiec as team masseur and assistant manager**

Although she competed sparingly, she did train well that winter with a view to the 2006 World Racewalking Cup. Alas, this wasn't to be. In the Sydney trial race, she was in contention for a spot until the final lap when Kellie Wapshott passed her. This meant the vital last spot in the team was awarded to Kellie rather than Claire. Claire had walked **1:37:42**, a good time but just not quite good enough. Two weeks later, she walked what would have been a South Australian State record in the Victorian 5000m track championship at the MCG, crossing the line in 2<sup>nd</sup> place behind Natalie Saville and stopping the clock at 22.01, only to be surprisingly disqualified after the event.



**Kellie Wapshott chases Claire in the 2006 AV 5000m race at the MCG**

She was totally devastated by the events of the two previous weeks yet it says a lot for her that she headed to China to compete in the World Walking Challenge where she powered through the first 10 km in a PB time of **46:10** before fading slightly to finish the 20 km event in a PB time of **1:35:18**.

Since that race, her fortunes have turned and she has much more consistent. In January 2007, she walked **1:35:36** at the Canberra A Series meet and subsequently won her first Australian Open title in March in Brisbane in extreme heat in **1:41:56**. She finally made her debut at the 2007 World University Games in August where she finished 14<sup>th</sup> in stifling conditions.

In December of 2007 she recorded **1:36:39** in winning a 20 km test race in Melbourne. After participating in an AIS altitude study in January 2008, she relocated to Adelaide for work and subsequently won the South Australian 5000m title in a PB time of **21:57**. Her next walk was in the National 20 km roadwalking championship in Melbourne in early March and it was a huge walk. A second place finish to Kellie Wapshott and a whopping PB time of **1:33:02** saw her named in the 2008 Australian World Racewalking Cup team and in the 2008 Australian Olympic team.



**A fit and fast Claire Woods in action in 2008**

She has now packed her bags again and returned to Canberra where she will continue her preparation for her biggest ever year. And what a year – to quote Claire:

*“After many highs and lows, I am very much looking forward to the upcoming year. WWC in Russia will be a huge event and August will be a life highlight with being able to compete at the Olympics alongside my fiancée and marrying him no less than 6 days after the closing ceremony back in my hometown of Adelaide.”*

Claire's success is well deserved. Her career has had more than its fair share of low points yet, on every occasion, she has come back stronger and more determined. She trains hard and races hard and has now forced her way into the ranks of our best ever women walkers. Her PBs indicate the quality of her walking

20 km	1:33:02	National Championship	Faulkner Park, Melbourne	Feb 2008
10 km	46:10	IAAF Challenge Event	China	April 2006
10000m	46:46	A Series Meet	Canberra	Jan 2002
5000m	21:57	SA State Championship	Adelaide	Feb 2008
3000m	13:00	A Series/ SA Interclub	Sydney / Adelaide	Feb 2007 / Feb 2008

Good luck to Claire in her big year – we wish her all the very best and hope that it will indeed be a year to remember.