

THE RULES OF RACEWALKING – A POTTED HISTORY

Walking was one of the first athletics endeavors to attract public attention and throughout the 17th to 19th centuries, many competitions were held, either from point to point or over set periods of time. But by the second half of the 19th century, walking had lost some of the appeal to the public that it had previously enjoyed. Charles Westhall, himself accounted a very fair professional walker, wrote in 1862 of the abuses that had been allowed to infiltrate into the sport, of the shuffling gaits and unfair practices that were to be seen at every sports gathering; and bitterly he complained of the

*“inability or want of courage on the part of the judges and referee to stop the man, who, in his eagerness for fame or determination to gain money anyhow, may trespass upon fair walking and run.”*¹

He is perhaps the first to define in print how walking should be judged

*“To be a good and fair walker, the attitude should be upright or nearly so, with the shoulders well back, and the arms when in motion held well up in a bent position, and at every stride swinging with the movement of the legs well across the chest, which should be well thrown out. The loins should be slack to give plenty of freedom to the hips, and the leg perfectly straight, thrown out from the hip boldly and directly in front of the body, and allowed to reach the ground with the heel being decidedly the first portion of the foot to meet it. The movement of the arms will keep the balance of the body and bring the other leg from the ground.”*²

But this was not definitive and, in those early days, judges had only the vague concept of ‘fair heel and toe’ to guide them in their interpretations. When John Chambers won the first English amateur walking championship in 1866, the event was judged under this ‘rule’.

1880 marked the formation of the Amateur Athletics Association in England and, in its inaugural Championships Meeting in 1880, the AAA published its first Rules for Competition. It is notable that the essentials of the modern internationally recognized rules, including sizes and shapes of weights and throwing areas, were here established. The 1880 ruleset consisted of 16 rules (a century later this had grown to 114).

Rules 14 and 15 was of particular interest to walkers.

14. *In Walking Races, cautions and disqualifications to be left to the discretion of of the judges.*
15. *The decision of the Judges in each competition to be final.*

Thus no effort was made to define what constituted correct walking and the judges were left to their own interpretations of what was ‘fair heel and toe’.



fair heel and toe ?

Australasia was one of the first Athletics Congresses to adopt formal rules for the sport of walking. A. O. Barrett³ and R. H. Croll⁴ submitted these propositions to the 1900 Australasian Convention of all the amateur associations in Auckland

1. *That a racing walker must have contact with the ground with one foot during a stride, and with both feet at the end of a stride.*
2. *That the heel of the front foot must touch the ground before the back foot leaves it.*
3. *That as the heel of the front foot touches the ground the leg must not be bent, its knee must be locked.*
4. *That the body and head must be kept upright.* ⁵

These rules were adopted as the formal rules governing racewalking in Australia and stayed in effect for many years. It took the wider racewalking world over 50 years to reach a comparable degree of sophistication in its own rules.

The I.A.A.F. was very slow to react to what was an obvious need. It was only the inclusion of race walking in the London Olympics of 1908 that brought into focus the lack of agreement as to what constituted walking. To resolve this vexing question once and for all, the I.A.A.F. Walking Commission was formed in 1912.

Yet it was not until 1928 that the I.A.A.F. published the following definition of race walking. This new rule was to be employed for judging purposes in all international competitions.

Walking is progression by steps so taken that unbroken contact with the ground is maintained.

This simple rule left a lot to be desired. It did not discuss in any manner or form the need to land on the heel or give any real guidance to judges to help them decide what was legitimate and what was unacceptable. Consequently, it received continuing criticism over a long period of time, both on the grounds that it was 'insufficient' and that it was not clearly understood. From time to time, proposals were put forward for new definitions or for considerable amplification of the existing one. Many of these proposals were concerned with walking 'style' rather than with the issue of contact with the ground. Many of these proposals made it to the agenda of I.A.A.F. Congress meetings but were either withdrawn or referred back for further analysis. ⁶

At the 1949 I.A.A.F. Conference in Stockholm, an acceptable proposal was finally confirmed and adopted, resulting in the 1928 definition being amplified to read

Walking is progression by steps so taken that unbroken contact with the ground is maintained. At each step, the advancing foot of the walker must make contact with the ground before the rear foot leaves the ground.

This was obviously only an interpretation of the former definition, but it did serve to explain the definition in clear terms and focus concentration on the essential element of contact with the ground. But issues still remained and came to a head very quickly when English walkers Allen and Hardy were disqualified when leading the 1950 European Walking Championship in Brussels. Further controversies in the 1952 Olympic 10,000m walk ensured that this version of the rule was short lived.

By the time the Melbourne Olympics came around in 1956, the rule had been split into two subsections and amplified to read

1. *Definition. Walking is progression by steps so taken that unbroken contact with the ground is maintained.*
2. *Judging. Judges of walking must be careful to observe that the advancing foot of the walker must make contact with the ground before the rear foot leaves the ground, and in particular, that during the period of each step in which a foot is on the ground, the leg shall be straightened (i.e. not bent at the knee) at least for one moment.'*

This rule now ensured that only one basic style of walking was acceptable – the original 'heel and toe' version.

This new rule served the walking community well and remained in force until, in October 1972, it was amended, with the addition of a further statement concerning when the leg must be straightened – in the vertical upright position. This amendment was necessary because of the ever increasing speed with which walkers raced and the increasing difficulties in deciding whether a competitor did in fact straighten his leg for the required instant. Now that instant was easier to judge – it had to be at a specific point in the stride.

Walking is progression by steps so taken that unbroken contact with the ground is maintained. At each step, the advancing foot of the walker must make contact with the ground before the rear foot leaves the ground. During the period of each step when a foot is on the ground, the leg must be straightened (i.e. not bent at the knee) at least for one moment, and in particular, the supporting leg must be straight in the vertical upright position.

This rule did not stand the test of time because it was still hard to interpret at high speed. If a competitor did not straighten on first contact with the ground and rolled through on an initially bent leg, there was still too much room for subjectivity in deciding whether he did indeed straighten for the required instant when in the vertical position. There were also increasingly frequent photographs that showed walkers without the necessary unbroken contact with the ground.

A new rule was now promulgated in April 1996. It contained one obvious change – that of a continuously straight leg during the first half of the stride) and one subtle change – that of maintaining contact as viewed by the human eye.

Race Walking is a progression of steps so taken that the walker makes contact with the ground, so that no visible (to the human eye) loss of contact occurs. The advancing leg shall be straightened (i.e. not bent at the knee) from the moment of first contact with the ground until the vertical upright position.

Although this is the rule under which we now operate, it would be naïve to think that this version is the definitive one. The rules governing racewalking have changed on numerous occasions as the sport continuously reinvents itself to maintain its credibility on the international athletics stage. I am sure that we will see future variations of how we define racewalking and how we judge it. Will electronic devices be eventually used to detect loss of contact? Will video be used in a similar way to the third umpire in cricket?. Whatever the future holds, the basic tenet of ‘fair heel and toe’ remains just as relevant today as when first promulgated many years ago.

¹ *The Sport of Race Walking*, Published by the Race Walking Association, Middlesex, Britain, 1962, p23

² *ibid* p46

³ A. O. Barrett was the inaugural club secretary of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club in 1894 and assumed the Vice-Presidency position in 1899 (he went on to hold this position till 1918). He was also a key figure in the new VAAA.

⁴ R. H. Croll was a co-founder of East Melbourne Harriers and an early member of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club. He went on to become the first President of the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club in 1923.

⁵ *Racing Walking Practical Hints* by A. O. Barrett (Robertson and Mullens, Melbourne, 1947) p 3

⁶ *Race Walking* by F. W. Blackmore, as published in the October 1950 issue of the English Magazine *Athletics*.