

Nathan Deakes

1996	World Junior Champs	Canberra	10,000m	3 rd	41:11
1997	Racewalking World Cup	Prague	20 km	53 rd	1:23:54
1997	World Student Games	Catania	20 km	5 th	1:28:04
1998	Commonwealth Games	Kuala Lumpur	20 km	3 rd	1:26:06
1999	Racewalking World Cup	Mezidon	20 km	DQ	
1999	IAAF World Champs	Seville	20 km	7 th	1:25:26
2000	Olympic Games	Sydney	20 km	8 th	1:21:03
2000	Olympic Games	Sydney	50 km	6 th	3:47:29
2001	IAAF World Champs	Edmonton	20 km	4 th	1:20:55
2001	IAAF World Champs	Edmonton	50 km	DQ	
2001	Goodwill Games	Brisbane	20,000m	1 st	1:19:48
2002	Commonwealth Games	Manchester	20 km	1 st	1:25:35
2002	Commonwealth Games	Manchester	50 km	1 st	3:52:40
2002	Racewalking World Cup	Turin	20 km	Withdrew	
2004	Racewalking World Cup	Naumburg	20 km	3 rd	1:19:11
2004	Olympic Games	Athens	20 km	3 rd	1:20:02
2004	Olympic Games	Athens	50 km	DQ	
2005	IAAF World Champs	Helsinki	20 km	Withdrew	
2005	IAAF World Champs	Helsinki	50 km	Withdrew	
2006	Commonwealth Games	Melbourne	20 km	1 st	1:19:55
2006	Commonwealth Games	Melbourne	50 km	1 st	3:42:53
2006	Racewalking World Cup	La Coruna	20 km	5 th	1:19:37
2007	IAAF World Champs	Osaka	50 km	1 st	3:43:53

Nathan Deakes, born 17th August 1977, stands 183cm and races at 66 kg. As a younger junior he mixed it as a middle and long distance runner and only started racewalking when he was 16. A multi-talented athlete, he still found time to play football in the Under 18 VSFL with the Geelong Falcons alongside his walking. By 1994 he had a 10000m track time of **48:58** and reduced this to **44:52** in 1995 to gain selection for the 1996 World Junior Championships.

He opened his international career sensationally when he won a bronze at these World Juniors. His time of **41:11** was a PB. That same year, while still a junior, he did **1:26:27** for 20 km, an Australian Junior best ever performance, and set new Victorian Junior records for 1500m (**5:32.9**) and 3000m (**11:34.9**). It was a meteoric rise to National prominence.

His talent was quickly recognised and, in 1997, he accepted an AIS scholarship and relocated to Canberra. His quick march to the top continued unabated. In April 1997, he came a creditable 53rd in the Racewalking World Cup with **1:23:54**. Then in June, he won the Australian Junior 10 km roadwalk in **41:19**. Just days after his twentieth birthday, he placed 5th at the World University Games 20 km in **1:28:04**.

In May 1998 while racing in Europe, he did **1:23:25** for a Commonwealth Games A qualifier. This resulted in his addition to the team for Kuala Lumpur. It was then back to Australia where he decided to try himself out over the 20 mile distance at the June Canberra carnival – the result was a 2nd place to New Zealander Craig Barrett and a wonderful time of **2:21:50**. Then onto Kuala Lumpur where he claimed his first Open international medal with a bronze in the Commonwealth Games 20 km. The time of **1:26:06** was another great walk in the hot and humid conditions.

Nathan started 1999 in January in great fashion with 1st place in the Adelaide Grand Prix 20 km race in **1:20.15**. This was a 3 minute PB and easily accounted for Nick A'Hern and New Zealander Scott Nelson. It was the third fastest ever by an Australian and Nathan was still in long distance training mode. Great things were expected in the Australian 20 km race in March but he was an unexpected DQ there. Then in May 1999 while competing at the Racewalking World Cup in France, Nathan was again disqualified, just 100 metres from the finish, while in 10th place. It was a devastating setback for him but, to his credit, he bounced back in 40^oC heat at the IAAF World Championships in Seville when he placed an outstanding 7th in **1:25:06**. This was the highest IAAF championship finish by an Australian male walker ever.

In December 1999, at age 22, he walked his first 50 km race. The occasion was the Australian 50 km title and Olympic Trial in Melbourne and he crossed the line with Dion Russell for equal 1st in **3:52:34**. This was his first senior Australian title and an amazing first up 50 km time.

To finish off a great year, he was the 1999 recipient of the AIS Vocation Award for exceptional performance in athletics and academic studies.

In February 2000, he walked in the Australian 20 km title race (also the Olympic trial) and was 1st again in **1:21:47**, beating Nick and Dion and Joel Sanchez of Mexico. The venue was the Olympic racewalking course in Sydney.

Then it was off overseas for more training and racing. News soon reached Australia that Nathan was injured and would have to rest. Locals waited with concern to see how he would bounce back at the Olympics. They need not have worried.

His Olympic walks were wonderful. In the 20 km, he finished 8th in **1:21:03** and then in the 50 km (held in very hot conditions) he finished 6th in **3:47:29**, a PB. What made his 50 km walk even more impressive was the way in which he aggressively walked. As Korzenowski applied the pressure and got faster and faster, only 2 walkers were able to stay with him – Nathan and Sanchez of Mexico. It was not till 35 km that Nathan finally cracked with Sanchez dropping off 5 km later. Nathan struggled home and dropped a few places, but gave notice that he was something special.

The big question was whether Nathan could continue at such an intensive training and racing level. He soon showed in that he was up to the task when he won the Canberra Grand Prix 10,000m walk in February in **38:53**, then successfully defended his Australian 20 km title a month later with a fast **1:21:02**.

He had the tough job of walking the double at the IAAF World Championships in Edmonton in August so he headed off overseas to prepare. His first big race was in Naumburg in Germany on 8 April 2001 when he won in a sizzling **3:43:43**, only 30 seconds outside Simon Baker's National Record. This actually ranked him number 1 over the 50 km distance for the year. The next week while competing in Mexico and suffering from diarrhoea, he withdrew at the 37km mark from his fourth ever 50 km race. Then on June 9 in Krakow in Poland, he came 4th in an International 10 km race in **38:09.7** (only 8 seconds behind the winner) for a new Australian best time. Then a week later in Dublin, he won the Dublin Grand Prix of Walking 20 km race in an astonishing **1:18:14**, the best ever by an Australian by over a minute. This time skyrocketed him into the all time international top 10 for the 20 km walk. Now he was a serious medal contender for Edmonton.



Nathan in the lead group in the 2001 IAAF World Championship 20 km race

He only had a couple of months to wait. The Worlds started in early August and his first event was the 20 km where he finished a wonderful 4th in **1:20:55**. His last 5000m had been done in 19:38 but he was still blown away by the Russians who took the 3 places ahead of him. A week later, he fronted for the 50 km but, in astonishing circumstances, he and the other 2 Australians (Darren Bown and Liam Murphy) were all disqualified. On top of that,

the 2 women (Kerry Saxby and Jane Saville) were also disqualified in the womens 20 km event. This created great discussion in the Australian press and walking received its usual share of ill informed criticism.

A month later he was under immense pressure as he walked the Goodwill Games 20,000m track walk in Brisbane. There he made no mistakes and won in a new Games, Australian and Commonwealth record of **1:19:48**. What made the win even more satisfying was the fact that he beat the great Polish Olympic dual champion Robert Korzenowski and the Russians who had beaten him only a month before in Edmonton. He raced from the front, gradually increasing the pace until only Korzenowski was left. Then in a final 400m surge, he got home by a margin of 4 seconds.

Nathan was Track and Field News merit ranked No 4 in 2001 for the 20 km Walk. (Dec 2001). His PBs were all recorded that year - 10000m in 38:09.7, 20 km in 1:18:14 and 50 km in 3:43:43



Nathan wins the 2001 Goodwill Games 20 km walk

As is the usual case for the AIS athletes, Nathan then disappeared back into training mode in Canberra and his next race was not until February 2002 when he easily won the Canberra Grand Prix 10,000m track walk in a sparkling **38:44.8**. This was followed on March 6 with a win in the Hobart Grand Prix 10,000m walk in **39:28.8**. Then on March 23 in Zapopan in Mexico (at the Semara International Walking Carnival), he won the 20 km event in **1:21:07**, beating Korzenowski once again and leaving World Record holder Segura in his wake. This confirmed Nathan's position as the World's current top walker.

It was no surprise when he won his third straight Australian 20 km title with a comfortable **1:23:36** in mid April in Brisbane. His subsequent selection in both the Commonwealth Games and Racewalking World Cup teams was a formality. But this burst of intensive racing had come at a cost – a hamstring injury refused to heal and valuable months of training were lost. It was not until June that he could resume decent training and there was some speculation about whether he could handle the double at Manchester given the closeness of the events.

People need not have worried. Nathan was in a class of his own with regard to the walks. In the 20 km event which was held on the hottest day of the Games, he flew from the gun with an amazing 7:42 for the first 2 km before settling down to a clear lead. He then dropped to a more conservative pace but still finished a clear winner in **1:25:35**. After a recovery time of only 36 hours, he fronted again for the 50 km event. This time, he did not have things his own way as New Zealander Craig Barrett, also a top 50 km walker, forced the pace and held Nathan over the first half of the race. But soon after the 25 km mark, Nathan made a decisive break and looked once again to have

things well in hand. It was a great surprise to everyone when the TV coverage returned to the walk a few minutes later to show him clearly in trouble and stretching his troublesome hamstring. With Barrett now on his heels, he slowly started again and tried to get back into the race. To his credit, he was successful and actually increased his pace to break the Kiwi walker. His final time of **3:52:40** was a new Commonwealth Games record and another world class performance. His double captured the public imagination and was generally recognised as one of the top performances of the Games. Korzenowski had won the double at the 2000 Olympics but had a 5 day break between the 2 events. Nathan had only 36 hours between the two events for his double.

As was always on the cards, his hamstring injury flared once again after his tough Commonwealth Games double and he was subsequently forced to withdraw from the Racewalking World Cup competition in October. As in past occasions, he retired to Canberra to recover from his injuries and work on his fitness and technique. But on this occasion, it was over a year before he returned to racing.

With the 2004 Olympics looming, Nathan had indicated that he intended to try for selection in both the 20 km and 50 km events. His first race was a Melbourne State League 3000m walk on 6 November 2003. Any thoughts that he might be down on race fitness were quickly allayed as he pushed out a first lap of 1:30. He then maintained this pace lap after lap to record a sizzling **11:17**. This was his first 3000m race since 1998 and was only a few seconds outside his PB. Three days later at Albert Park, he faced his next test – a 20 km roadwalk. After passing 5 km in 20:01 and 10 km in **40:12**, Nathan felt a familiar nigggle and retired at the 12 km mark, anxious not to cause any further damage.

His next appointment was 4 weeks later when the 2004 World Cup 50 km trial was held at Albert Park. No one (except perhaps Nathan and his coach Brent Vallance) was ready for the time – an astounding **3:39:43** – a four minute PB and the 11th fastest 50 km performance of all time. Each 10 km was faster than the one before and he left the field reeling in his wake.

Nathan now had his Olympic 50 km qualifier but he wanted to walk the 20 km in the 2004 World Cup so needed a 20 km qualifier. The A Series meets of the summer came and went and Nathan, still suffering niggles, let them go. The Australian 20 km roadwalk at the end of February would be his final chance – and he walked a conservative race to win in **1:23:11**, a qualifier at last. As usual, he then disappeared back into training mode to re-emerge 9 weeks later in Naumburg with his first ever medal in a major World Championship – 3rd in the 20 km with **1:19:11**. He was the only walker capable of staying with Perez and Korzenioski when the decisive break came.



2004 World Cup 20 km medallists – Nathan Deakes, Jefferson Perez and Robert Korzenioski

Nathan was quoted after the event

“I am very happy to have performed well in my first international race back. I’m under no illusion that I was beaten by two of the all time greats. It is nice to know that I am up there with the best at this time in an Olympic year.”

Two months later in Athens, Nathan finally realised his dream with an Olympic medal in the 20 km event. The heat was brutal and it was not a day for great times but the favourites Brugnetti, Fernandez, Perez and Deakes walked

shoulder to shoulder in an ever quickening pace to leave the rest of the field behind. The Italian Brugnetti finally broke free to win in 1:19:40, a PB, and Nathan was third in **1:20:02**. He commented after the race

"I did come to win, but the others got away. I was a little apprehensive thinking I had two reports (they turned out to only be cautions), but I tried to make a last-ditch bid to win with 3 km to go. They got away again. I tried everything I had left with 1500m to go but they were too far ahead. Hopefully I haven't lost my one shot at gold. Next week I'll do the 50 km and that should be good too. I rate my chances in the 50 km very high after today. To finish with two medals is not unrealistic."



Nathan crosses the line in Greece to win his Olympic bronze medal

The Olympic 50 km race was contested 5 days later and Nathan was once again in an elite leading pack with defending champion Korzenioski and World Record holder Nizhegorodov of Russia. Just after the 30 km mark Nizhegorodov dropped off the pace and there were now only 2 walkers left – Deakes and Korzenioski. But tragedy struck when the Australian was disqualified at the 33 km mark. Like Edmonton in 2001, a report free 20 km race had been followed by a disqualification in the 50 km event.

Nathan's next race was not until February 2005 when he walked from the front to win the Canberra A Series walk in a superb **1:19:23**, his second fastest time ever and his fastest in Australia (and second only to David Smith's 1987 time of 1:19:22). He then backed up the next month with a further win in the Australian 20 km roadwalk in Sydney in **1:19:39** - yet another quality walk. This was his fifth win in six years in this event and underlines his dominance on the local level.

Two weeks later, he won the opening round of the IAAF 2005 Racewalking Challenge in Tijuana in Mexico with a time of **1:21:28**. Then three weeks later, he took second place in the next round of the IAAF Challenge in Rio Maior, Portugal. His time was **1:19:15**. After a further three weeks he contested the third round of the IAAF Challenge in the city of Cixi, China. There he crushed his four-year-old Oceania record of 1:18:14, setting a whole new standard with his winning mark of **1:17:33**.

A week later, he fronted for and won the Australian 50 km championship in Melbourne. His time of **3:47:51** seemed little more than a training session.

In the space of 3 months, he had put together 5 world class performances over the 20 km distance and a world ranking 50 km performance. After a number of years marked by minimal racing and recurring injuries, Nathan had well and truly laid down the gauntlet to the leading walkers in the world.

He then went into serious training mode in Europe and looked set to take the World Athletics Championships by force. It was a huge disappointment to him and to the Australian public when he injured himself in the final weeks leading up to Helsinki and he was forced to sit out the 20 km and 50 km walks.

To his credit, he returned to Canberra, rehabilitated, went back into training and returned to the racing scene just as fast as ever. In his first race for 2006, he won the National 20 km title effortlessly in **1:22:13** to clinch his Commonwealth Games selection. His next race was the A Series meet in Melbourne in early March when he strode to a new Commonwealth 5000m track walk record of **18:45.19**. Then onto the Commonwealth Games a week later when he repeated his Manchester double with two new Games records – winning the 20 km in **1:19:55** and the 50 km in **3:42:53**.

His final race before La Coruna was in Yangzhou in China in late April when he came 8th in **1:19:07**, yet another sub-eighty performance. Onto Spain in mid May and another inspired walk to come 5th in the World Race Walking Cup 20 km event in a time of **1:19:37**.

Finally Nathan seemed free of injuries and able to build a solid training base. The results of this would be evident as the year progressed.

His next appointment was the Australian 30 km championship in Hobart on August 28. He had eyed David Smith's Australian record of 2:05:59 for some time and this seemed a good time to challenge it. On a tough course and in windy conditions, Nathan confounded the experts with a superb time of **2:05:06**. Walking a solo race, he lapped all but one in the field and left us shaking our heads in disbelief.

The Australian 50 km championship was scheduled for December 2nd in Geelong, Nathan's home town, so he committed to the local organizers and prepared for what he hoped would be a world record attempt. The course was less than satisfactory, twisting and turning around the harbour area. It has several small but steep inclines and walkers had to negotiate a variety of surfaces. To top things off, a blustery wind buffeted walkers as they negotiated the tricky course. But nothing could stop Nathan. His first 4 10 km splits were 43:30, 42:30, 42:00 and 42:30. At the 40 km mark, he was 3 minutes under World Record pace. He needed all of that buffer as he slowed in the final laps but the result was never in doubt. He crossed the finish line in **3:35:47** to break the existing World Record by 16 seconds. It was without doubt the greatest race in his career this far.

It was no surprise when, in February, he was awarded the prestigious Australian Male Athlete of the Year in the 2006 Australian Sporting Awards.

Nathan pulled up well from the 50 km and seemed free of injury as the new year dawned. But then his plans spiraled downhill once again as he was forced from the training track with further leg problems. He withdrew from the Australian 20 km championships and from the subsequent IAAF Grand Prix event in China. Time was off the essence with the World Champs in Osaka in late August and he could not afford to race until he felt 100 percent.

He headed to Europe in early April, basing himself in Italy and training solidly at last after some 3 months layoff. His first race was the IAAF Grand Prix event in La Coruna in early June. His third place in **1:19:34** behind Fernandez of Spain and Han Yuncheng of China showed that he had lost little with his enforced layoff.



Nathan wins the 2008 IAAF 50 km World Championship in Osaka

After a successful training period in St Moritz, he made a tough decision – he would forgo the 20 km event in the World Championships and put all his eggs into the one basket – the 50 km event. It proved to be the correct decision as he dominated the event in Osaka, walking away from his main rivals at the 30 km mark and winning effortlessly in the hot and humid conditions. His final time of **3:43:53** was a lot faster than anyone had predicted in the oppressive summer conditions and gave him his first official World Championship. Now he has the dual titles of World Record Holder and World Champion. Only Olympic Gold remains and we look forward to 2008 with great anticipation.

It's not easy being an elite walker. In Nathan's new conference after the win, he commented

“This year we have been living on our savings. So this (world championship prize money) is the only way we can make money,” he reveals. “It's going to be an enormous help. It's going to be fantastic for us. By coming over to Europe we put a lot of other things on hold. We are paying a mortgage back home and rent in Europe. Hopefully the money will ease financial constraints the next twelve months leading into Beijing.”

Nathan ended the year with multiple accolades. He was a finalist for the Australian Male Athlete of the Year in the 2007 Australian Sporting Awards, he was the Telstra Athletics Male Athlete of the Year and he was ranked World No. One in the 50 km event by authoritative American magazine *Track and Field News*.

Alas, the euphoria of 2007 was followed by the worst possible scenario the following year. First he was forced to bypass the Australian 20 km Olympic trial in March, then the IAAF Racewalking Challenge event in Beijing in April and finally the Racewalking World Cup in Russia in May. At that stage, he announced his intention to bypass the Olympic 20 km event and concentrate on the 50 km event. Finally, a major hamstring tear in July meant a full Olympic withdrawal and need for major surgery and long rehabilitation. 2008 passed without Nathan racing in any form.

January 2009 saw him tentatively resume training in Canberra with a view to defending his IAAF World Championship 50 km title in August in Berlin. With a wild card entry as defending champion, all he has to do is get himself to the start line fit and free of injury. I am currently following his progress from afar and keeping my fingers crossed that he will indeed beat the odds and complete a fairy tale comeback.

At the age of 31, Nathan has compiled a most impressive international record, with medals at the World Junior Championships, the Commonwealth Games, the Goodwill Games, the Racewalking World Cup, the World Championships and the Olympics and a World Record over the 50 km distance. Without doubt, his big time performances make his Australia's greatest ever racewalker, be it male or female. A consideration of his PBs leaves one breathless.

3000m	11:17.0	1988
5000m	18:45.2	2006
10 km	38:44.87	2002
20km	1:17:33.0	2005
30 km	2:05:06	2006
50km	3:35:57	2006

It is frustrating to contemplate what might have been over the past few years if he had been able to avoid the long string of injuries that have plagued his recent career. We can only hope that he can fully recover from this latest setback. Only time will tell.