

Rhydian Cowley

20048	Racewalking World Cup	Cheoksary	U20 10 km	39 th	45:24
-------	-----------------------	-----------	-----------	------------------	-------

Rhydian Cowley is one of four Victorian walkers who made their international debut in 2008. In Rhydian's case, he represented Australia in the Under 20 men 10 km roadwalk at the World Racewalking Cup in Cheboksary in Russia in early May.

Rhydian, born 4th January 1991, is 17 years of age and is a secondary school student at Melbourne Boys High School in inner Melbourne. He has consistently excelled in his under-age sporting pursuits and his 2008 achievement comes after nearly 10 years of involvement in the sport of racewalking.

His athletics career started with the Knox Little Athletics Club in the 1998/1999 summer season in the Under 8 division and it started with immediate success.

"I came second in my first walk race. And I'm quite sure that the other kid trained. I found it fun and there was a local coach, David Blackwood (father of Mark Blackwood), so Jordan (my twin brother) and I joined him and started training."

Like most young boys, he tried different sporting endeavours, all with success. He was just as good at running as at walking and he won the Rowville Little Athletics Centre 'Best Under 8' Award at the end of his first season. He also excelled at cross country running and was a keen basketball player.

In the next couple of years, his running and walking times plummeted.

"I started walking really good times that were pushing the state records. I was DQ'd at the region finals as an Under 9 but I went on as an Under 10 to win the State Championship and set a new Victorian record (5:09.12 for the 1100m walk). I didn't train as seriously after that for the rest of Little Aths, but I did win 4 consecutive State walk titles (U10-U13). This culminated in my appearance at ALAC (Little Aths National Championships, only happens for under 13's). There I was DQ'd in the walk, and finished 6th in the 1500 run."

As he reached the end of his Primary School years, he started transitioning to senior athletics, competing in some Athletics Victoria events and winning a number of Victorian underage State Titles. But finding that his times were not improving, and having DQ issues, he moved to a new coach, Ken Walters, and it proved to be a winning move.

"I've been with Ken ever since. This was probably also around the time that I first realized that I was nationally competitive. First, he deconstructed my technique, then I got into proper training, and the results started coming."

In December 2003, he took bronze in the Australian Under 14 1500m Schools championship in Brisbane in **7:16.01** and then improved his time to **7:03.10** in winning the Victorian U14 1500m walk in March 2004.

It was at this time that he joined the Victorian Race Walking Club and experienced his first roadwalks. That first winter season saw him win the Victorian Under 14 3 km title in **15:52**. Come the summer season, he took bronze again in the 2004 Australian Schools championships, walking **15:05.13** for the Under 16 3000m track walk and then improved his time to **14:47.91** in winning the Victorian Under 16 3000m walk.

He dominated the local Victorian scene in the 2005 winter season, winning the Victorian Schools Under 16 5 km in **24:14** and the Victorian Under 16 5 km in **24:45**. He duly went into the National roadwalking championships in Adelaide as the firm favourite but, in what was the first of a string of unfortunate circumstances, he was forced to retire after contracting a severe head cold a few days before the big event.

Over the next 12 months, he continued on his merry way, winning title after title and generally reducing his times race by race. His big breakthrough walk came in July 2006 when he won the Victorian Under 16 5 km title in **23:47** and he travelled to Hobart to contest the Australian Under 16 5 km roadwalking title as favourite once again. But as in 2004, disaster struck and he was forced to retire with illness.



Rhydian in action in his first roadwalking season in 2005

Finally in December 2006, he arrived at the start line in an Australian championship in decent health. His gold in the Australian Schools Under 16 3000m track walk in **13:58.59** must have been a satisfying win. As the summer progressed, his 5000m time dropped until, in February 2007, he won the Victorian Under 20 5000m title in **22:20.81**.

Sometimes relatively insignificant events can have far reaching effects. Perhaps it was the following one for Rhydian.

I remember one night, I think it was in 2007, after a 5k for Premier League when 'the guys', Chris, Tom, Megan, invited me out to go and have a cool down walk with them. This was probably the first time I felt like I was part of the group of the best walkers in Victoria/Australia. I think you know how I've been going since then. It gets hard for me to remember exact dates and races because there are so many that I do now, it seems like every second race is some sort of championship. I only thought about how I fitted in as a potential Australian representative when I went to the Under 17 development camp last year.

Since then, he has been unstoppable. In July 2007, he won the Victorian Under 20 10 km roadwalk in **50:05**. In September he won the Australian Under 18 8 km roadwalk in **37:56**. A week later, he won the Victorian Open 10,000m track championship (his first open win) in **50:09**. In October, he won the Victorian Schools Under 20 5000m walk in **22:05.44** and finally in December he won the Australian Schools Under 17 5000m walk in **23:08.55**.



Rhydian wins the Victorian U20 10 km roadwalk in July and the Victorian Open 10000m track walk in September 2007

But if his progress had been good up till then, it now took off in another gear. A week after his win in the Schools championship, he recorded a huge 90 sec PB time of **46:42** in finishing second to Daniel Coleman in a 10 km roadwalk at Albert Park. He improved this to **46:37** in early January 2008, again at Albert Park. Then in early February, he won

the Victorian Under 20 5000m title in a 25 sec PB time of **21:41.36**, following this up with a 10 km roadwalk of **44:47** two weeks later at Fawker Park in Melbourne.

Ranked as number 2 in the Australian Under 20 men, Rhydian travelled to Queensland in mid March with a fair degree of confidence. This was the big one – the 2008 Australian Under 20 10,000m championship was also the official trial for the World Junior and World Racewalking Cup – it all came down to one final race. He was up there early, going through the 4000m mark with Daniel Coleman in just over 22 minutes and feeling comfortable. However, by 4500m he was having abdominal spasms and had to stop. To his credit, he struggled on to finish in 5th place in **46:06**, a gutsy performance but well outside his Melbourne time of three weeks before. It was a bitter blow to him and he was now at the mercy of the selectors with regard to World Racewalking Cup selection.



Rhydian walks 44:47 at Fawker Park in Melbourne in February 2008

Luckily for him, common sense prevailed. He had the times on the board and there were extenuating circumstances. Two weeks later when the World Cup team was announced, his name was one of three in the Under 20 men's event

His race at Cheboksary was excellent - 39th in **45:24** and the second Australian to finish. He had well and truly justified his selection and had produced the goods in the tough international arena.

Back in Australia, he now had to settle down to complete his final year of Secondary School education so his remaining 2008 races were few and far between. He won the two Victorian roadwalking titles on offer (U18 Schools 5 km – **24:02**) and U18 10 km (**48:10**) and raced to third place in the Australian U18 10 km championship in August in Melbourne but in a slow **48:50** but these were his only appearances over the winter.

He spent January in Canberra at an AIS walking camp gradually getting fit again and started his 2009 campaign with two promising results in February - a win in the Victorian U20 5000m championship (**22:03**) and a solid **45:53** 10 km walk at Albert Park. In late March, he continued his build with a second placing (**46:13**) behind Dane Bird-Smith in the Australian U20 10000m title in Adelaide in windy and cold conditions.

As the winter season now unfolds, we keenly wait to see what times he can produce and whether he can continue his rise through the ranks.

When asked for his major influences:

I owe a lot of where I've got today to my dad. He runs me around to all my training and races, pays for travelling costs and generally has mentored me through the big races and the lows, and it's great to have his company considering that I train on my own. Also, everyone at the clubs I've been at: Knox Little Aths, Glenhuntly, and Walkers Club; they've all been really supportive of me and all my walking endeavours (even though Trevor Vincent still reckons I should drop walking and focus on my running.) Also, my coach, Ken, shows a lot of trust in me and helps me have the belief in myself of what I'm capable of doing, even if I have some off days or weeks.

His list of most memorable walks makes for interesting reading

- Under 10 Little Athletics 1100m walk Championship where I broke a state record (which I still hold)
- Winning my walk race in the Pacific School Games
- Getting bronze at my first national championships in Brisbane
- Competing at the Australian Youth Olympic Festival last year
- Winning the Victorian Men's Open 10,000m track walk championship last year
- Smashing my school record in the 1500m walk last year (I love all my school events). I couldn't do better this year because our Aths day was on at the same time as the race in the gold coast.
- Winning my first track and road walk national championships last year.

Rhydian's PBs are outstanding for his age and indicate his all round talent as a walker.

1500m	6:14	Olympic Park (MHS school athletics day)	March 2007
3000m	12:51	Olympic Park, Melbourne	February 2007
5000m	21:41	Olympic Park, Melbourne	February 2008
10000m (track)	46:06	Griffith University, Gold Coast, QLD	March 2008.
10000m (Road)	44:47	Fawkner Park, Melbourne	February 2008

And some final words from the man himself:

I don't think there's much else that I can add apart from the fact that I'm hoping to get into the AIS some time after I've finished school, and hopefully getting some more international appearances in the coming years, starting with World Juniors in two years time. Hopefully I can be ready for the Olympics by / in 2016.