

NATHAN DEAKES

(17 Aug 1977 -)



Nathan was born in Geelong and began athletics as a junior, also playing Australian Rules football with the Geelong Falcons in the under 18 VSFL competition. He first explored race walking at age 16.

In 1995 Nathan finished third in the National Under 18 3000m walk in Adelaide. The following year he was second in the Under 20 Nationals over 5000m on the track and was selected for the 1996 World Under 20 Championships in Sydney in August. He had a great walk finishing third in the 10000m behind the Spanish duo of Francisco Fernandez and David Marquez. The bronze was the first international medal in a most decorated career that was to follow.

Soon after in September Nathan was back on the road, winning the under 20 20km in Melbourne.

In 1997 Nathan finished and encouraging fifth in the 20km walk at the World University Games in Catania, Italy and had his first foray in fully open international competition, finishing 53rd in the World Race Walking Cup in Podebrady, Czech Republic.

The following year Nathan was selected for his second full senior international – and the first episode of his exceptional connection with the Commonwealth Games. In the heat of Kuala Lumpur and despite only just having turned 21, Nathan finished third in the 20km behind his team mate Nick A'Hern who won gold.

1999 proved to be a year of development and exploration for the burgeoning young talent. In May, Nathan competed in the World Race Walking Cup in France but was unfortunately disqualified 200 metres from the finish whilst lying in tenth place.

Four months later at the World Championships in Seville, Spain in 40 degree heat there was a seventh placing in the 20km won by Ilya Markov (Russia). Nathan then ventured into the longer event, winning a significant first National 50km title in a quick 3:52:53. Importantly it earned him selection for the Sydney Olympics.

By this time Nathan was on a scholarship at the AIS and was being coached by former East German world champion and Olympic medallist Ron Weigel. Nathan had previously been coached by Yvonne Melene and later during his career by Brent Vallance and Craig Hilliard.

On the home roads of the Sydney Olympic Games Nathan was competitive – walking well to finish sixth in the 50km and eighth over the shorter distance. Both won by the great Polish walker Robert Korzeniowski.

In 2001 there were personal bests in Naumburg over 50km and in Dublin 20km. Nathan then competed in the World Championships in Edmonton and came up against a formidable Russian quartet who set a fast pace. One of the Russians Vladimir Andreyev was disqualified which left the remaining Russians in front but with the Australian in close contact.

Nathan only lost touch in the last kilometre and finished fourth behind the Russians led by again by Markov. A week later he contested the 50km walk but was surprisingly disqualified.

On his return to Australia a few weeks later there was quite a different experience to the norm. The Goodwill Games, as per its short tradition, featured a 20000m track walk and at home in Brisbane won in a new Commonwealth record – defeating world and Olympic champion Korzeniowski.

The 2002 Commonwealth Games were held in Manchester, England and Nathan won both the 20km and 50km.

He missed the 2003 Paris World Championships due to a hamstring injury but returned strongly at the end of the year when he broke through the 3hrs 40min barrier with a new Commonwealth record (3:39:43) over 50km.

The following year 2004 was Olympic year and Nathan put himself forward as a potential medallist when he finished third in the 20km at the World Race Walking Cup in the by now familiar surroundings of Naumburg.

At the Games in Athens Nathan walked strongly to gain a precious Olympic bronze medal in the 20km behind Italian Ivano Brugnetti. A week later he contested the 50km – but when in second place he was disqualified at the 34km mark.

In 2005 Nathan lowered his personal best for 20km in China to 1:17:33 but further hamstring problems forced his withdrawal from the Helsinki World Championships.

Melbourne hosted the 2006 Commonwealth Games and with nine medals available in the two men's and the single women's walk Nathan led the Australian walkers to win all but one of them. Nathan defended both of his titles from Manchester winning both golds. His confidence was growing and followed his successful Commonwealth campaign by finishing fifth in the 20km at the World Race Walk Cup in La Coruna, Spain, leading the Australian walkers to a team silver medal.

In his home town of Geelong in December 2006 came the first of two very special achievements in just nine months – when Nathan walked a world record in the 50km in 3:35:47. It was on a difficult course with blustery winds yet he prevailed. He was named Australian Sportsman of the Year for 2006.

The second came when the long walk at 2007 IAAF World Championships in Osaka, Japan was staged on 1 September. Surpassing his world record, Nathan had his most memorable achievement. In hot conditions he took the lead at the 30km mark and was never headed to take out the 50km gold medal ahead of Yohan Diniz (France) and Alex Schwazer (Italy).



Nathan's battle with hamstring injuries returned in 2008 – this time requiring surgery. It meant that he had to forego the chance of another Olympics. He also missed 2009 but slowly returned to competition in 2010 although there was no fourth Commonwealth Games.

By 2011 he was getting back to an internationally competitive level and was sixth in an IAAF challenge race in Dudince, Slovakia in 3:48:02. Nathan was selected for the IAAF World Championships in Daegu, Korea and in the 50km he took the lead at 20km. He led through 30km after which he began to slow as the hamstring problems returned. He was eventually forced to stop.

By the end of the year he had again returned to form and finished second in the National 50km in Melbourne in December. Nathan was selected for the London 2012 Olympics where he walked well going with the leaders but slowed after 35km to record 3:48:45 in 22nd place – since upgraded to 19th due to the suspension of the Russian walkers. Nathan then called time on his illustrious competitive career.

During his career Nathan won ten senior and one junior national walk titles. In 17 major team appearances for Australia there were five gold and four bronze individual medals and a team silver. In retirement he served as a member of the Board of Directors of Athletics Australia and was the recipient of the Edwin Flack Award for 2014.

Nathan's race walk personal bests were: 3000m (11:17.0 in 1998), 5000m (18:45.19 in 2006), 10000m (38:44.87 in 2002), 20km (1:17:33 in 2005), 30km (2:05:06 in 2006) 50km (3:35:47 in 2006).

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Acknowledgements: *Athletics Australia Historical Results: Peter Hamilton, Paul Jenes, Fletcher McEwen, David Tarbotton; Athletics Australia Handbook of Records and Results; IAAF World Championships Handbooks: Mark Butler; Athletics Olympic Statistics Book: Mark Butler; Once Were Walkers: Tim Erickson*



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