

Watching the race walk - more to it than meets the eye

Ann Peel

Ann Peel has represented Canada in race walking competitions on a number of occasions. Among her accomplishments are a silver medal in the 10 km walk at the 1987 Pan American Games, a bronze medal in the 3 km walk at the World Indoor Athletics Championships and an 8th place in the 10 km walk at the II World Championships in Athletics.

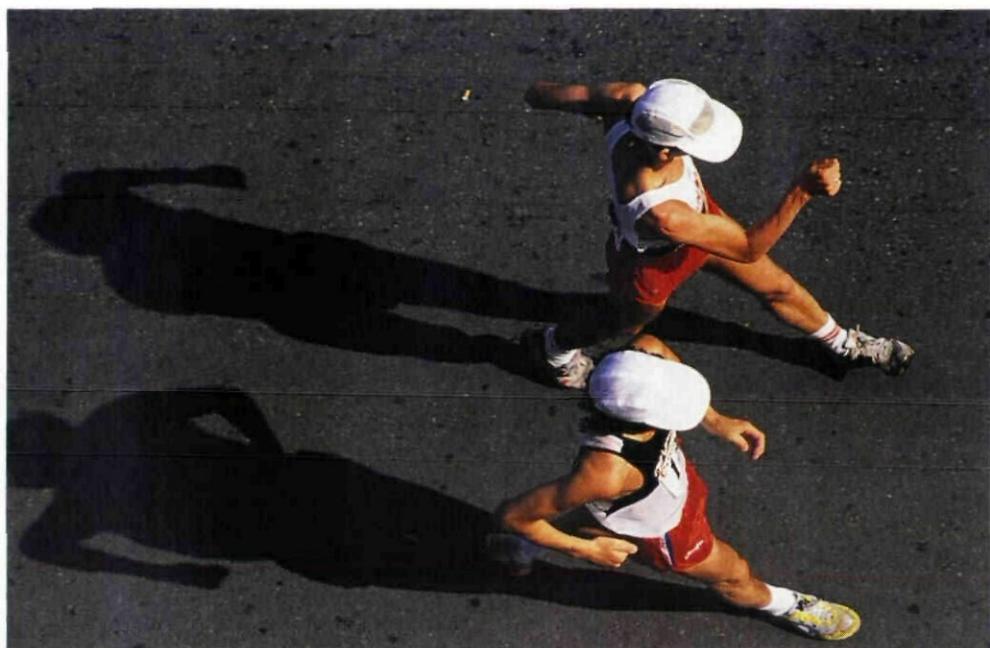
Racing within restrictive rules

Have you ever wondered how to watch the race walk? And because you haven't understood it thought it boring? Watched by a knowledgeable spectator, the race walk is one of the most interesting events in track and field because it's not just a "first across the line" or who can go highest or farthest event. The winner of the race walk must not only have beaten opponents, but must also have passed the scrutiny of the judges along the course.

There are two rules in race walk. Put simply, the supporting leg must be straight (usually for a split second as it comes under the athlete's body - this is the rule against "creeping"), and one foot must be on the ground at all times (which means that before the athlete's back toe leaves the ground the front heel must have made contact - this is the "lifting" rule). As an athlete's turnover or strides per minute get faster and faster, so it becomes more difficult to determine whether these rules are being broken. This is the root of the controversy.

A sport for humans - not technocrats

The important thing to remember is that there are no absolutes in race walking. That is, race walking, by definition, is a human sport judged by the sets of human eyes belonging to the judges on the course. Whether one later sees a still picture or a slow motion video of an athlete "lifting" is irrelevant - human eyes do not work at the speed of cameras and what may be caught by a camera will be missed by the judges. This does not mean that the athlete "cheated" and got away with it. What it means is that



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the judges at the time of the race, judging with the limitations in their equipment (the human eye), did not judge that athlete to be walking illegally. Criticizing the judges after the event may be an interesting exercise, but it is not part of the sport.

This seems to be, however, the main reason behind the sport's unpopularity in the track and field community. (Not among the public, however, who appreciate and enjoy the sport more than the track and field community is willing to admit.) Everyone in track and field thinks they are a race walk judge. This probably occurs because there are times when the judges are lenient for motivations such as encouraging the younger athletes (a misguided approach in my opinion for those athletes simply have more trouble later on). Again, it is because the sport is human that we live with its failings. Line judges can be seemingly unfair in tennis, the starter's pistol can be held too long in the sprints, and the long jump judge may misread the marking on the take-off board, but these are not

sufficient reasons to condemn or dislike the sport.

Points to look for

Next time you are watching a race walk, notice how the more experienced athletes will work in the presence of the judges. They will hide themselves in the pack, not so that they can "cheat" because it would be too difficult to keep changing rhythms from lifting to not lifting and back again; but so that they can reduce their exposure to the judges and reduce the chances of being disqualified. When only three disqualifications, one from each of three different judges, are necessary to disqualify an athlete, the athlete will want to reduce exposure simply to play the odds. An experienced athlete may also force a competitor's hand by provoking that athlete to accelerate in front of the judges. Bear in mind also, that race walkers do not have the luxury of leaving the race to the last few hundred metres. You must have made your move long before then

since the judges usually group around the finish to increase the scrutiny on finishing athletes. Observe also how top athletes will walk at almost 200 strides per minute because the faster the stride pattern, the faster the athlete can move without leaving the ground. Slow, long strides increase an athlete's air time and increase the chances of lifting. Once a race walker takes a foot off the ground, it must get back on the ground again as quickly as possible. Note also how the shoulders and arms are low and relaxed to reduce the chances of the arms and shoulders rising high and causing the athlete to pull up and lift. In fact, many of the top athletes, keep the driving shoulder very low, almost driving down, as it swings through. Arm movement is also very fast to assist in keeping the strides per minute high. The arm will almost punch the air as it comes through, with a very short quick backswing, to increase the strength of the forward movement. Indeed, the arms and

shoulders play a very important role in the race walk and are the key to moving quickly and efficiently.

Be a knowledgeable spectator

So, race walkers not only have to try to be the fastest and the strongest - they must do so whilst obeying two restrictive rules. This adds an interesting and challenging element to the sport. Next time, instead of turning away because you think the race walkers are going too slowly and look strange, remember that the speed is relative and the race is what matters. Watch the race walkers to see how they adjust their technique to the warnings of the judges, watch how their body helps them.

There is much to appreciate as a spectator in race walking competition, involving several dimensions of technique and subtle tactics: but in order to understand the event it is necessary to be well informed.

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Hilary Lissenden was born in the Channel Island of Jersey in 1966. She studied *English Literature* at Clare College, Cambridge University, and then took a further degree in Shakespeare at the University of Bristol. She lived in France for a year and is fluent in French.

Prior to joining the Development Department she worked for two years in the production and editorial departments of the trade book publishers Pan Macmillan.

She is a sprinter, representing Croydon Harriers. She has also toured and competed in several countries as a member of the Achilles Club. In 1990 she took up the triple jump and won the British Southern Counties Championship.

