

Introduction to Racewalking

Racewalking is a track and field event. It has been part of the Olympic Games since 1908. Distances varied in the early years but are now set at 20 kilometres (12.4 miles) for men and women and a 50K (31.1 miles) for men. The 50K has the distinction of being the longest track distance contested in the Olympics. Racewalking events are also part of the World Track and Field Championships, Pan American Games and other international meets. Domestically it is part of USA Track and Field National Championships- Junior, Open and Masters divisions. Shorter distances are contested for the Youth and Junior Olympics programs. Local Clubs sometimes hold lower keyed 1-mile, 5K or 10K events.

A unique combination of endurance and technique, racewalking is popular in many other countries where it is introduced at a young age. The smooth flowing style of the elite racewalkers allows the men to clip along at 6:15 per mile and the women at 6:50 per mile. While the top-level athletes move at incredible speeds, the racewalking technique can be used at any pace and the fitness benefits are at all levels.

Racewalking in competition requires one to adhere to the two rules:



- 1) Maintain contact with the ground - the lead foot touches down the instant of, or before the rear foot leaves the ground (as seen by the human eye).**
- 2) Straightened leg - The leg must be straightened (not bent at the knee) from the moment of foot contact through the vertical position.**

These rules are used to differentiate racewalking from running. In competitions, there are certified judges who observe the athletes to make sure all are adhering to the racewalk form. If three or more judges write up a red card, indicating an infraction of the rules, the athlete is disqualified from the race. If the judge deems that they are in danger of an infraction, coming close to receiving a red card, they will be shown a “yellow paddle” with a symbol of the infraction for either bent knee or loss of contact to help the athlete correct their form. An athlete can get an unlimited number of yellow paddles.

The racewalking motion is smooth and flowing, it begins with an awareness of center of gravity and body position; an upright posture is maintained as the arms swing from the shoulders with the elbows held at a 90-degree angle. The feeling is to roll like a wheel, skimming along across the ground, land on the heel with the toe up, roll forward and push off the toes at the back of the stride. When the foot touches down, the leg will be straightened at the knee, not bent, and is kept that way until passing through the vertical, upright position under the body, once beyond that position the knee can then bend as the leg drives forward. The hands come the midline of the body ever so slightly, coming up no higher than mid chest level and brushing by the hips. Shoulders are relaxed, weight into the elbows. Foot placement is as if walking on a line, one in front of the other, beginners however should not be so concerned with this that they feel like they are on walking on a tightrope.

The racewalking technique is best learned by observing an athlete in motion. Young kids can often just watch and pick up the form quickly without considering all the complex biomechanics. As with any new sport, it may feel awkward in the beginning but in a short time gives way to a fluid and powerful stride.

Many runners use racewalking to cross train as it uses slightly different muscles and allows for less impact. A runner comes down with 4-5x their body weight, regular walking 2x the body weight but with racewalking, because of the way one lands and rolls along, the impact is only 1 1/2x the body weight. Sometimes people ask if it hurts the hips, thinking that racewalkers swing the hips side to side, when actually they are just rotating the pelvic girdle around the spinal axis, effectively extending forward and back, putting very little stress on the hips. The action is being driven from the core muscles, with the emphasis on the turnover speed.

What usually gets a little sore in the beginning is the shin muscle that lifts the toes up on heel strike. If you practise regularly, shin tightness diminishes after the first two weeks. The racewalk form utilizes the core muscle groups extensively; each mile of racewalking is like doing 50 crunches. It is also excellent for toning the upper thighs and gluteal muscles.

Coaching the racewalk event is no more difficult than coaching any of the other technical events, it just takes attention to mechanics over a longer duration.