

ATHLETICS

MARATHON & RACE WALK

The athletics program saves one of the most historic and enduring Olympic races until last

The marathon remains one of the Olympic Games' most celebrated events. The toughest and most gruelling of all Olympic contests, it is steeped in history.

According to legend, the Greeks originally introduced it to commemorate a soldier named Pheidippides, who ran about 40km (25 miles) carrying the news "Be joyful, we win!" of the Greek victory against the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 490BC. On delivering the message, Pheidippides apparently dropped dead.

Featured at every modern Olympics since 1896, the men's marathon has been won by all manner of people — an Argentinean newsboy, a Finnish sewing machine salesman, an Ethiopian army sergeant and a French motor mechanic. The women's marathon was added to the Olympic program in 1984.

Race walking events were added in 1932 (men's 50km), 1956 (men's 20km) and 2000 (women's 20km).

AT THE GAMES

The Mall in central London provides the start and finish for the marathon and race walk events.

Marathon competitors will complete one short loop and then three longer loops along a total 42.195km scenic road route taking in the River Thames and St Paul's Cathedral, among other iconic city landmarks.

All race walk events use the same 2km loop, taking them up The Mall towards Buckingham Palace.

MEN

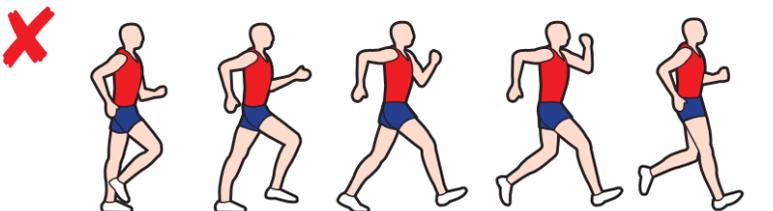
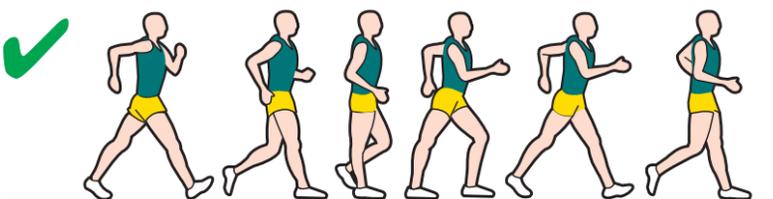
- Marathon (August 12)
- 20km race walk (held August 4)
- 50km race walk (August 11)

WOMEN

- Marathon (held August 5)
- 20km race walk (August 11)

RACE WALKING

With their hip-rolling, shoulder-pumping style movements, competitive race walkers are tough athletes who require incredible amounts of stamina, endurance and mental strength.



MARATHON DISTANCE

Royalty can take the blame for the slightly odd 42.195km (26 miles 385 yards) distance of today's standard international marathon. At the 1908 London Games, the marathon began in front of Windsor Castle so the royal grandchildren had a good view. That meant the 26-mile race would finish across the field from the royal box in the Olympic Stadium. Queen Alexandra objected and the race was extended by 385 yards.

WALKING JUDGES

Judges are located around the course. No electronic aids are used because a rules breach must be visible to the naked eye. When a judge sees a walker in danger of breaking a rule, he/she may caution the walker once and notify the chief judge.

RULES

Walking races have two key rules:

1 An athlete's front foot must touch the ground before his/her rear foot leaves the ground.

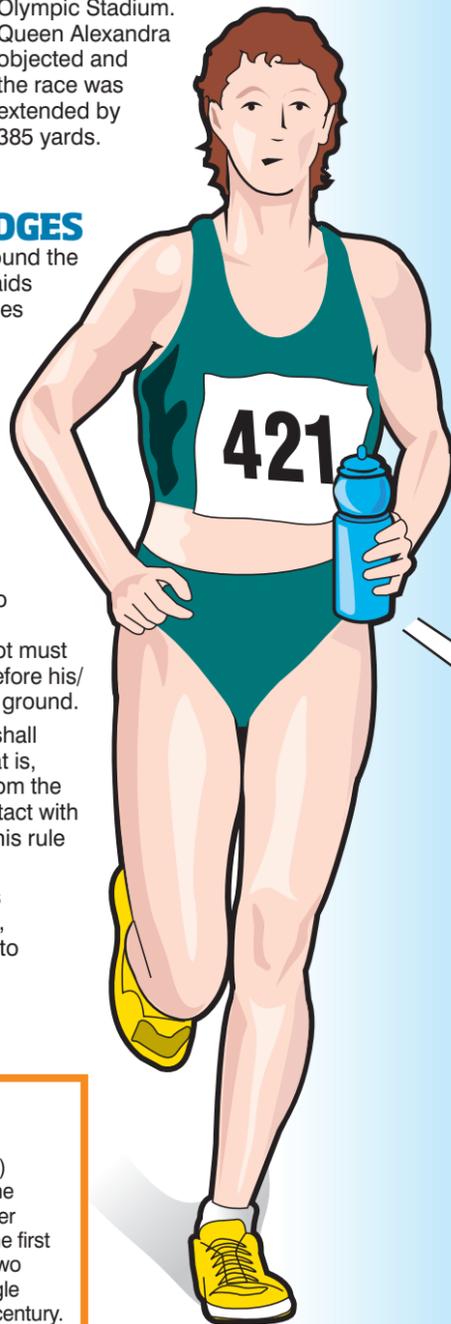
2 The advancing leg shall be straightened (that is, not bent at the knee) from the moment of the first contact with the ground. Breaking this rule is called "lifting".

If three different judges give a walker warnings, the third offence leads to disqualification.



FACT FILE

By winning silver (50km) and bronze (20km) at the 2008 Games, race walker Jared Tallent became the first Australian male to win two athletic medals at a single Games in more than a century.



THE COMPETITION

The marathon and the race walk differ from the athletics track events in that participants may leave the course (such as for a toilet break) as long as a judge supervises them. If unsupervised, they are disqualified.

STARTING

There is no draw for starting positions. Athletes take their places randomly when the starter calls them to the starting line and the race begins at the sound of the starter's pistol. Anyone who jumps the gun twice is disqualified.

ATHLETES' KIT

Mind: Long distance runners and walkers must possess great physical strength as well as immense toughness.

Heart: They must have the ability to race hard and surge at different times during a race.

Head: Most race without caps to allow heat to escape from the head.

Tops: Athletes wear singlets perforated for ventilation.

Bottoms: Shorts to prevent chafing.

Shoes: Runners wear special lightweight shoes which feature cushioning.

DANGERS

Dehydration: Loss of body fluid through perspiration and lung evaporation can mean a runner loses up to 10 per cent of their bodyweight during a race.

Heat: Because of increased skin blood flow, runners can't lose heat efficiently so must drink fluids and sponge themselves regularly during the race.



REFRESHMENTS

A series of refreshment stations with drinks and wet sponges are positioned at regular 5km intervals along the marathon route so runners can easily pick them up as they pass. Athletes also may provide their own drinks and nominate the stations where they want them placed.

RECORDS

Olympic marathon record holders
Male: Samuel Kamau Wanjiru (KEN), Beijing 2008, 2:06:32 hrs
Female: Naoko Takahashi (JPN), Sydney 2000, 2:23:14 hrs
World marathon record holders
Male: Patrick Makau Musyoki (KEN), Berlin 2011, 2:03:38 hrs
Female: Paula Radcliffe (GBR), London 2003, 2:15:25 hrs