



Fiona van Heerwaarden



Fiona Johnson: set new record for 800 metres walk

Hot conditions no problem for walker

HOT conditions at Geelong Little Athletic Centre on Saturday, saw many good performances and several records fall.

Under 11, Fiona Johnson (OG), broke the 800m walk record after a very even contest with Jane Henderson (GG).

I was born in Frankston, Victoria and moved to Perth when I was fourteen.

After studying Business at Curtin I have worked in government, hospitality, IT, construction, trade and most recently administration. I have had two stints living overseas; working in London and other parts of the UK and travelling around Europe, the US and Africa. I am married to John and we have three boys aged 9,13 and 15.



Thinking back, I started Little Athletics as an U9 in Geelong. I didn't mind throwing things but I really liked to throw myself around at jumps; and to run. I particularly love high jump and I think previous gymnastics experience was an advantage.

The Little Athletics centre championships arrived and one of the events I chose to enter was the race-walk, thinking it would be an unpopular event and I had a better chance of doing ok. My plan worked. I walked away with my first ever medal; bronze for the U9 800m walk. It turned out that I loved race-walking. From the age of twelve or thirteen I focused on race-walk, trained hard and did reasonably well at state and national competitions.

Moving to Perth at age fourteen was a race-walk killer for me though. I lost my network of athletics friends and coaches, and was an awkward teenage girl. Race-walking in this foreign (and hot) place was way too embarrassing. So I quit.

Fast forward to 2021 - my friend and I joined MAWA and entered the Australian Masters Games in Perth. So, after a 30 year break, I started race-walking again. To begin with I could only manage about 30 metres at a time. Starting again as an adult was interesting as many things had changed; like the use of technology for timing and results. Some training recommendations had changed but others were still the same. In the 1990s the motto was 'go hard or go home' training-wise. I had to 'untrain' that attitude out of me. Now I aim for most training sessions to be easy, with some intervals and threshold sessions to test how I am going. Ideally, I'd train four times a week, doing a mix of slow running, a long run/race-walk, a threshold session and intervals with a strength session or two. The reality is I only do part of that most weeks. When setting goals I have to be realistic, balancing training with my family and work commitments.

I have coached and served on various club committees and now that two of my children are teens I hope they will return the favour and help out at MAWA for me!

As a kid I was inspired by Kerry Saxby and we were penpals for a while. My family visited her family home at Ballina and I saw her medals and memorabilia. As an adult I am inspired by MAWA athletes who are older than me and still competing at state and national record level. MAWA is a great community. I joined for the events and exercise and stay also for the people; an unexpected bonus of membership.

The main race-walking season is winter, and I can usually train more consistently then. Last season my goal was increasing distance, so I signed up and trained for the Run for a Reason. I also achieved my aim of a race-walk 3000m PB at MAWA State Championships. I find setting a goal is great for maintaining motivation.

Unfortunately this year I am away for the walks at the MAWA State championships, but I have challenged myself to compete in the endurance runs, steeplechase, pentathlon and high jump.

I visit family in Victoria two to three times a year, joining in with either the Geelong Masters club at my old Little Athletics grounds, Landy Field or Victoria Race Walkers Club (VRWC) in Melbourne. I joined the VRWC for a championship event and won a gold medal - a slightly updated version of the same medal I won years ago as a junior with the club.

I don't have a coach now but I consult fellow MAWA walkers for advice. In the future when my children are older I hope to travel to other parts of Australia and overseas to compete.

When I started race-walking as a child, my parents took it up too; in their 40s with no prior athletics experience. My Dad was quite successful, with state titles and local records. It wasn't until I started again in my 40s that I really appreciated what it took for them to start a new sport in their 40s. I have a lot of respect for their achievements whilst they juggled children and work, as I am doing now.

Jane Saville being disqualified at the Sydney Olympics affected my feelings negatively about race-walking but thankfully it led to changes in the sport. There aren't many other events where you can complete almost the whole race, to then be disqualified. Sometimes it takes moments like this to spark changes and all sports and athletics events have evolved over time. I have only ever been disqualified once as a race-walker (when I was ten) and I hope to never repeat this. I was racing against someone who wasn't in my age group. This taught me some race strategy, which, for competition, can be just as important as training.

Like most athletes I have niggly things that hurt, but nothing that has kept me off training for very long. I am asthmatic and have also had lung surgery so my lung capacity is reduced. This makes my breathing sound loud when I run and race-walk. Scuba diving is out for me but my main ambition is to be in athletics for the long game.

My main event is race-walking, but I also run as often as I can. In the last five years I've had a go at throws, heptathlon, the One Hour track run and my latest addition - steeplechase. You'll see me regularly at Ern Clark on Thursdays and sometimes at the Sunday runs. I am keen to try pole vault and am also building running distance for a half marathon. Marathon? Never say never.



Fun Facts about Fiona

I love to travel and discover new cultures and food.

In Africa I was charged at by hippo. In attempting to climb Mount Kilimanjaro, I got altitude sickness and had to be quickly evacuated.

I will have a crack at most sports and activities- Snow skiing (which I love), City to Surf, tennis with friends, swimming, hiking, and even a burlesque class.

I have been in a car across the Nullarbor ten times.

I jumped out of a perfectly good aeroplane for fun. Twice.