

COMMONWEALTH GAMES

The History of Race Walking in the Commonwealth Games

The proposal to establish a sporting event among all members of the British Empire was first put forward in 1891 by the Reverend Astley Cooper. In an article in The Times, Cooper suggested a quadrennial competition to increase goodwill, strengthen understanding, and renew ties between the countries of the Empire. In 1911, the Festival of Empire was held in London to celebrate the coronation of King George V; the event included championships in which teams from several imperial nations competed in four sports.

The official birth of the Games, however, dates to 1928, when Canadian Melville Marks Robinson was asked to plan the first British Empire Games, hosted in 1930 by the city of Hamilton, Canada. Thus, a project that had been discussed within the British Empire for over thirty years was realized. Eleven nations participated in the inaugural edition of the event, with a total of approximately 400 athletes. Since then, the Games have been held every four years, with only one interruption in 1942 and 1946 due to the Second World War.

The official name also reflected the geopolitical changes of the twentieth century: initially called the British Empire Games (1930–1950), they became the British Empire and Commonwealth Games (1954–1962), then the British Commonwealth Games (1966–1974), and finally the Commonwealth Games starting with the 1978 edition. Today, the event features athletes from the territories, regions, and member states of the Commonwealth of Nations, a loose association of 56 independent countries, mostly former colonies of the British Empire. The entire event is organized by the Commonwealth Games Federation.

The Evolution of Distances and Events

Men's walking made its debut at the 1966 Games in Kingston, Jamaica, with a 20-mile event featuring 12 athletes representing seven nations. This distance was maintained for three editions, before being replaced by the 30km starting at Edmonton 1978. The next turning point came at Kuala Lumpur 1998, when two road events were introduced: the 20km and the 50km. The latter remained on the event schedule for only three editions (1998, 2002, and 2006). After being excluded from Glasgow 2014, the discipline returned to the 10.000-meter track event at the most recent editions in Birmingham and Glasgow.

For women, race walking was introduced for the first time in Auckland 1990 with the 10km event, which featured 11 walkers from four different nations. Starting in Manchester 2002, the distance was extended to 20km and then converted—like the men's race—to the 10,000 meters on track for the Birmingham 2022 and Glasgow 2026 editions.
Finally, it's worth noting that the latest edition in Glasgow saw the lowest number of participants in history, for both men and women.
This drastic decline is a far from encouraging sign for the future of race walking, not only within the Commonwealth Games but, more generally, for the discipline worldwide.

The Protagonists and Records of the Event

Australia takes the lion's share of the medal table by nation. In the men's and women's events, the Australian team won 40 medals (19 gold, 14 silver, and 7 bronze) out of a total of 81, a figure equal to 49.4% of the total. The Kangaroo Nation is followed at a considerable distance by England and Canada.

The most successful male race walker in the history of the Games is Australian Nathan Deakes, who has won four gold medals and one bronze. Deakes achieved a memorable double in both 2002 and 2006, winning both the 20km and 50km events; adding to this extraordinary haul is the bronze medal he won in the 20 km in 1998. His closest rival is Canadian Guillaume Leblanc, who stood on the podium three times between 1982 and 1990 with a total of one gold, one silver, and one bronze. Also noteworthy is the excellent record of Australian Nick A'Hern, winner of two consecutive gold medals: the first in 30km in Victoria 1994 and the second in 20km in Kuala Lumpur 1998.

In the women's event, the record for gold medals belongs to Australians Jane Saville and Jemima Montag, both three-time winners. Saville won the 10km in 1998 and the

20km in 2002 and 2006; Montag has dominated the last three editions of the event. Her compatriot Kerry Saxby also stands out in the specialty's list of winners, having climbed onto the podium three times thanks to two gold medals in the 10km (1990, 1994) and the silver in 1998.

The best all-time times in Commonwealth Games history are as follows:

- 20 miles (men): Noel Freeman (Australia) – 2:33:33 (Edinburgh 1970)
- 30 km (men): Simon Baker (Australia) – 2:07:47 (Edinburgh 1986)
- 20 km (men): Dane Bird-Smith (Australia) – 1:19:34 (Gold Coast 2018)
- 50 km (men): Nathan Deakes (Australia) – 3:42:53 (Melbourne 2006)
- 10,000 meters track (men): Evan Dunfee (Canada) – 38:36.37 (Birmingham)
- 10 km (women): Jane Saville (Australia) – 43:57 (Kuala Lumpur 1998)
- 20 km (women): Jane Saville (Australia) – 1:32:46 (Melbourne 2006)
- 10,000-meter track (women): Jemima Montag (Australia) – 42:13.40 (Glasgow)

