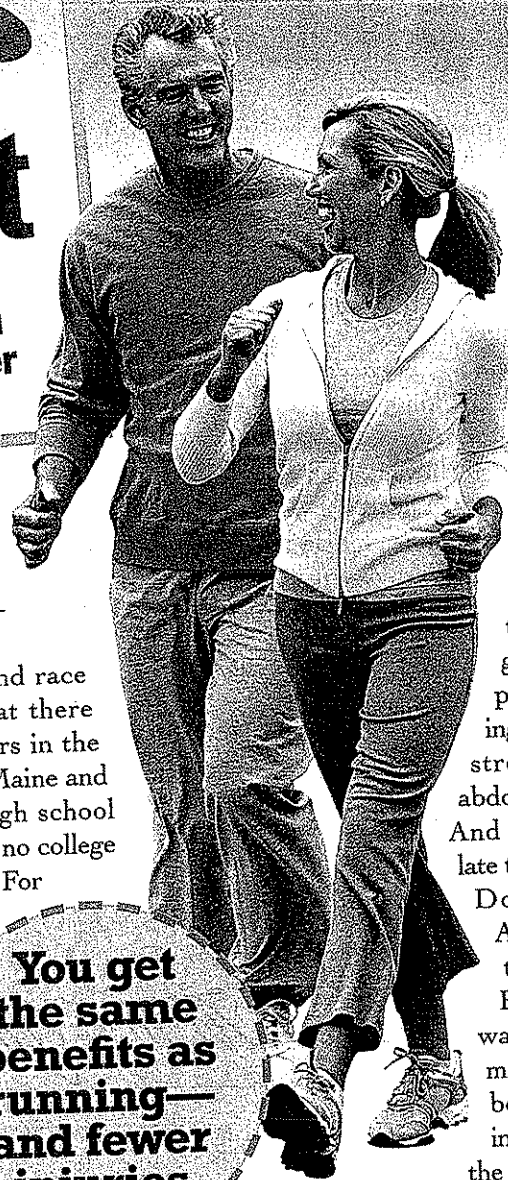


# Racewalking: The Olympic Sport You Can Do

By Ben  
Paynter



**T**HE NEXT TIME YOU SEE someone in brightly colored spandex flailing his arms, wagging his hips, and high-stepping briskly around the track like some manic flamingo, you just might want to ask: Could I do that? The somewhat awkward-looking strut is called racewalking, and it's actually an Olympic sport—one in which the United States desperately needs new blood. So whether you are in your 20s or your 50s, overweight or suffering from an old sports injury, pay attention. This just might be your best chance to earn a medal.

"The average runner who has mastered the technique very early on could be competitive," says Tom Dooley, a two-time American Olympian who set 11 speed records in national competitions from 1966 to 1980. That you've never heard of Dooley doesn't bother him. He calls his sport "completely arcane"—on par with curling or synchronized swimming. And he understands that other athletes might laugh at him, at least until he passes them. The best in the sport can clock six-minute miles.

## Mastering the Technique

Racewalking first appeared in the Olympics in the early 1900s. It has only two basic rules. First, you must keep one foot on the ground at all times and roll forward on

it in a heel-to-toe motion. Second, you can't bend your knees until one leg is directly beneath your torso.

Jeff Salvage, a coach and race coordinator, estimates that there are only 10,000 racewalkers in the country. Only two states, Maine and New York, offer major high school competitions, and there are no college NCAA racewalking events. For the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the U.S. could have sent nine racewalkers, but only three—two men and one woman—were fast enough to qualify. "Yeah, we're not that good," Salvage admits. "The field is wide open for American walkers."

## A Safe Way to Get Fit

Whether or not you become competitive, the sport is an excellent way to get fit. Racewalking provides the same aerobic and cardiovascular benefits as running but with three times less chance of injury. A study published in the *British Medical Journal* shows that elderly people who walk fast are three times less likely to

die of cardiovascular complications than those who go at a slower pace. Racewalking even helps to strengthen your abdominal muscles. And it's never too late to start. Joanne Dow, the lone American female to qualify in Beijing in 2008, was a 29-year-old mother when she began racewalking. After entering the sport in her 70s,

Jean Brunnenkant, now 93, earned eight gold medals in five Senior National Games. From an expense standpoint, Jeff Salvage figures you can't afford not to try it. Unlike other types of exercise, there's no gym membership to buy and no equipment needed beyond a pair of durable shoes. "How you get dressed up is up to you," he adds. Which means you can work up to the flashy spandex. And, just maybe, get your picture on that Wheaties box.

You get  
the same  
benefits as  
running—  
and fewer  
injuries