

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA USATF ELITE RACE WALK DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Race walking has been a part of modern track & field competition since its inception. Men's and women's race walks are contested in the Olympic Games, IAAF World Championship, and Pan American Games. Unfortunately, America has produced very few medalists in any of these competitions. Dismayed by the decline of American race walking in general, and in Southern California in particular (where the sport has basically been a masters level fitness activity), Skip Stolley, Vice President of the Southern California Association and chair of the Open Track & Field Committee, asked Chris Rael to head its new Open Race Walk Committee. Chris is a former member of the USA Race Walk Team and he was charged with developing an initiative to create competition and instructional programming that would increase the number of open level, competitive race walkers in Southern California. What's more, Stolley provided Chris with more than 50% of the Committee's entire 2007 operating budget—much of which was used to purchase high-tech video cameras and equipment to record, view, and analyze race walking technique.

In its first year, Chris' initiative focused on the six NAIA schools in Southern California, recruiting their second-tier men and women distance runners to try competitive race walking (an NAIA championship event), and conducting coaching clinics to provide the technical instruction, training methods, and encouragement necessary for them to experience success at the national level.

"Many sub-elite distance runners can successfully transition from distance running to race walking with proper coaching. Several members of the current USA Race Walk Team are former runners and we need to attract more of these runners to race walking," says Chris. "We can shape raw talent with an aggressive walking technique immersion program and provide the racing opportunities they need to gain experience. Our ideal elite race walk candidate is a middle distance runner age 16 to 26, with the physiology, athletic ability, motivation, and competitive desire to achieve success at the national and international levels."

The athletes who participated in the first year of this flagship program worked very hard, reaped big rewards, and produced numerous break-through races in a short amount of time. In only 4-months of intensive training, Paul Greive of Concordia University (Irvine, CA) won his first two collegiate race walk events in times that qualified him for the NAIA National Track & Field Championships. He then won the Southern California USATF 5K Race Walk title with the 5th fastest time recorded by a collegiate walker in the U.S. for 2007 and placed 6th at the NAIA Championships to earn "All-America" recognition. Paul had never race walked before, but once he committed to the program he gave it his best effort under the watchful guidance of Chris Rael.

Lindsey Connolly of Westmont College (Santa Barbara, CA) experienced similar success. In her first season of race walking she qualified for, and competed at, the NAIA Indoor Track & Field Championships, won the Southern California/West Region USATF Championship, and claimed the Santa Barbara Relays race walk title. Her biggest accomplishment, however, occurred at the 2007 NAIA Outdoor National Track & Field Championships in blazing hot conditions in Fresno, CA. With trackside temperature at race time above 100-degrees, Lindsey had a superb race with athletes who had been competing in the walks for years and finished in 6th place to earn "All-America" honors.

"The next step will be to keep Paul and Lindsey in the sport of Race Walking after graduation, keep them improving, and keep them competing at the next level in open, national-class events...with the ultimate goal of vying for a spot on our USA Race Walk National Teams, says Chris. Paul and Lindsey were truly phenomenal in this first year of this initiative and proved it can develop national-caliber race walkers. Their success is exactly what I had envisioned when we launched the program and I am confident it will motivate others to pursue national prominence as race walkers."

Although the initiative focused primarily on the NAIA athletes, an outreach program was also conducted with the SCA Youth Track & Field Committee and its youth coaches and clubs to foster the development of race walking within their ranks. To that end, a new Youth Race Walk Chair, Dawna Brown, was appointed to help implement the program. Dawna brings her experience as an athlete and coach to the position and is acquainted with almost every youth coach in the Southern California Association. She helped to coordinate and conduct mini race walk clinics and urged youth meet directors to include a race walk in their meets. During the 2007 track season, the number of youth race walk participants increased four-fold, as did the quality and depth of competition in those races. Plans are now in the works to expand the race walk clinics in 2008 and double our efforts with youth track clubs to give athletes more exposure and opportunities to participate in race walking.

“2007 was a year of tremendous progress and accomplishment, says Chris. We met or exceeded the objectives of our strategic plan and saw performance and programming success at every level. Going forward, we have the momentum to continue to grow and expand, and believe the mission and design of this program is what was needed to develop both collegiate and post-collegiate race walkers in Southern California.” In 2008, we have plans for more race walk coaching clinics, instructional DVDs to be given free of charge to all NAIA athletes, and an increased presence at road race events to recruit sub-elite distance runners to walking.”

“We believe this initiative can be model for enhancing competitive race walking on a national scale in USATF Associations across the country, says Skip Stolley. Chris invites anyone interested in learning more about this program to contact him at rael2003@yahoo.com.”



Lindsey Connolly of Westmont College



Paul Greive of Concordia University



Chris Rael with Paul Greive (L) and Lindsey Connolly (R)