

HOW TO RACE WALK

by Ron Laird, Head Race Walking Judge, A.A.U. Jr. Olympics

Fast and legal race walking requires correct technique and continual effort. The hamstring and hip muscles are the prime movers of the race walker. Their combination of pulling and pushing allows the walker to achieve and maintain the stride length and leg speed needed for high levels of fitness and success on road and track. This forceful and rapid pulling back of the straightened or hyper-extended leg into the pushing of the hip is what gives the sport its distinguished hip motion. The beginning race walker must master and practice this unique leg and hip action for efficiency and leg speed. The ankles and toes can also provide a final push forward. The hips act like shock absorbers by making race walking a series of low impact steps.

The two rules of competitive walking tell us first that the leg must be straight at the knee when the heel of the advancing foot contacts the ground. Also, the rear toes cannot look as if they have left the ground before the front heel touches the ground. See the two pages on judging for more details.

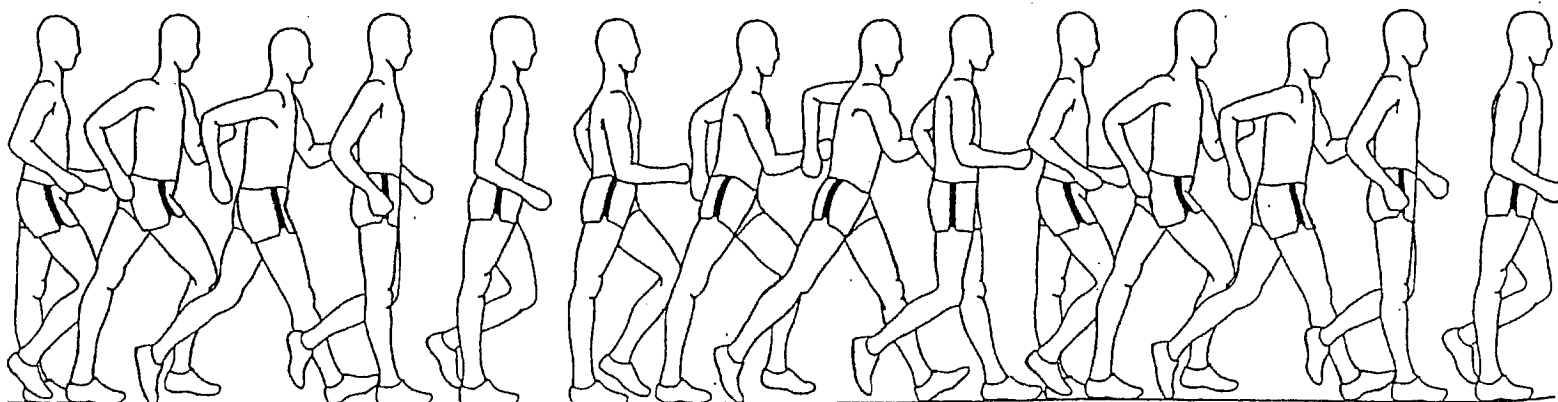
Study the figures below to see what good body posture, arm swing, leg action and legality of movement look like. Follow the side stripe and the top line of the shorts to see how the hips rise and fall and turn back and forth with each step. This unique hip action is the key to quick and efficient leg turnover and stride length. Look at how the straight or hyper-extended leg pulls and pushes the ground back underneath and behind the walker. See how level the shoulders stay during all that arm pumping.

The leg is pulled and pushed back behind you before bending at the knee and quickly swinging forward. If the rear leg is snapped away just before the front leg's heel touches down, it can easily cause the fast moving race walker to break contact with the ground and illegally gain a few forward inches through the air with each step. Any sort of a prancing action or a knee drive that is too high can also cause a loss of contact with the ground when race walking fast. When this happens, final ankle and toe pushing power can be decreased or even eliminated. Keep your knees down and feet close to the ground as you quickly bring them forward.

Over-striding while moving quickly is fatiguing and can also cause you to float up and off the ground enough to be detected by experienced race walk judges. Take steps that are quick and comfortable for your body size and level of fitness. Try to always keep your neck and face muscles relaxed.

Keep your body and head in an upright position with hips directly underneath you. Any forward lean needs to come from your ankles, not your waist. Bending at your waist can push your hips behind you so much that it can cause you to use a hiking technique where hip rolling is restricted and bent-knee walking often replaces correct straight-leg action. Always work on a posture and balance that move you forward quickly and efficiently.

Use your ankles and toes to push you straight ahead, not upward. Your feet should land along or on top of a straight line with toes pointed forward. Correct knee and hip action help you to roll along the outside of your feet and legs giving them better stability and efficiency. A little toeing out is okay if it feels efficient and helps you achieve the best pulling and pushing angle for your feet and legs.



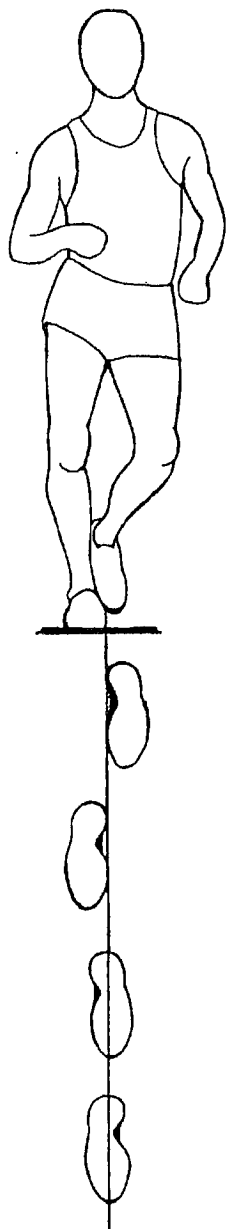
Note the heel-and-toe contact during the widest spread of the stride and the straight leg as the heel contacts the ground.

Hold your arms at a 90 degree angle while pumping them vigorously and smoothly. Swing your hands to about the midpoint of your chest but no higher than breast level. Swinging your hands across your chest help to turn the hips back and forth. Strong and rapid arm pumping also helps to achieve and maintain fast leg turnover. Don't tighten up and hunch your shoulders during vigorous arm action.

Workouts are similar to those of distance runners, except you do them while always using good legal race walking technique. Since this style of walking allows you to move so quickly and efficiently and with low impact, your body can take a lot of quality training and racing without all the pounding to feet and legs runners constantly endure.

The different ways your muscles are worked should feel strange at first, but a lot more comfortable and natural after a few weeks of conscientious training. It's normal for beginners to feel soreness in their shins and behind their knees until those areas get used to this new way of walking. Flexibility and strengthening exercises for hips, stomach and hamstring muscles will always be of specific help.

It sometimes is easier for beginners to develop correct hip motion and knee straightening by practicing with very short steps. It's also useful during this short-step drill to press your knees back as far as possible when pulling your heel back and sitting back into your hip. Coaches must always teach straight leg landing to all their race walkers to help them avoid future disqualifications.



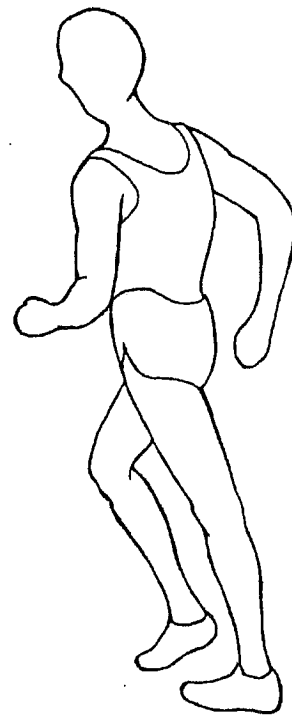
Whether or not you are coached, proper technique must always be mastered and practiced. Good racing results will always require a high level of fitness, efficient and legal technique and the discipline to push your pace in training and racing. As with all endurance sports you will need to concentrate and learn to tolerate the discomfort that comes with long hard efforts. Perseverance is necessary. Be patient and allow yourself to improve gradually.

To repeat, when straight leg pulling and hip drop pushing are combined with the right amount of hip turning, you have what it takes for fast and legal race walking. Other requirements are concentration, good posture, vigorous arm pumping, flexibility and lots of effort. Correct technique enables you to move your legs quickly, but power and stamina must be developed to sustain fast leg turnover for increasingly longer periods of time.

You don't need special equipment, facilities or training partners to enjoy this beneficial exercise and its cross-training advantages. Race walking is a very natural and efficient way to move once you've learned and practiced it for a few weeks. Don't let any feelings of awkwardness or embarrassment discourage you from participating in this challenging and rewarding Olympic sport.

Since race walking is a low-impact activity with many fitness benefits, it can be an important addition to grade school and high school physical fitness classes and their track and field programs. Race walking can be practiced throughout a person's life for fun, fitness and sport.

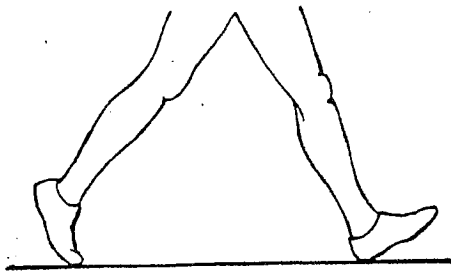
It is important to work on efficient and legal technique no matter how fast or slow you race walk. This helps time and effort pass quicker, and helps you move and look better. Train consistently and wisely and you'll achieve satisfying results.



Excellent sitting back into hip and knee joint of supporting leg. Note the low shoulders and forward lean from the ankle.

THE JUDGING OF RACE WALKING

by Ron Laird, Head Judge, A.A.U. Jr. Olympics



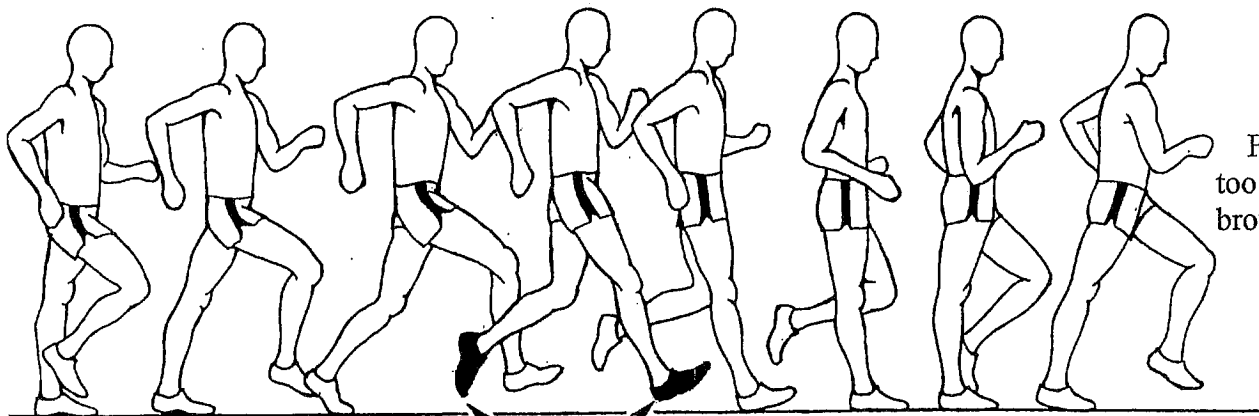
The purpose of having race walk judges is to insure the fairness of the competition for all walkers.

There are only two things the judges of race walking look for: straight leg action and apparent and continuous contact with the ground.

The advancing foot must look like it has made contact with the ground before the toes of the rear foot have left the ground. It is during this spread-out, heel-and-toe position that race walkers break or maintain contact with the ground. When there is loss of contact, the walker illegally gains a few inches forward through the air with each step.

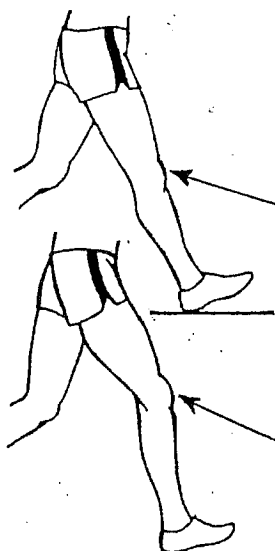
Loss of contact is the toughest violation to judge because it is difficult for the human eye to accurately detect. It happens very quickly and within very small spaces. The eye cannot focus on simultaneous heel-and-toe contact while the feet are moving so rapidly. But when the feet begin to look like they are floating or bouncing off the ground, the judges must take action.

All judging decisions are made on the basis of what is seen by the unaided eye (glasses are fine). No camera or video equipment may be used for judging, during or after a race. Even though the human eye is not perfectly able to judge a race walker's contact with the ground, this is the method the sport has decided to use over the years. It has proven to be the fairest way to control the event.



Forward stepping knee too high and rear leg being brought forward too soon.

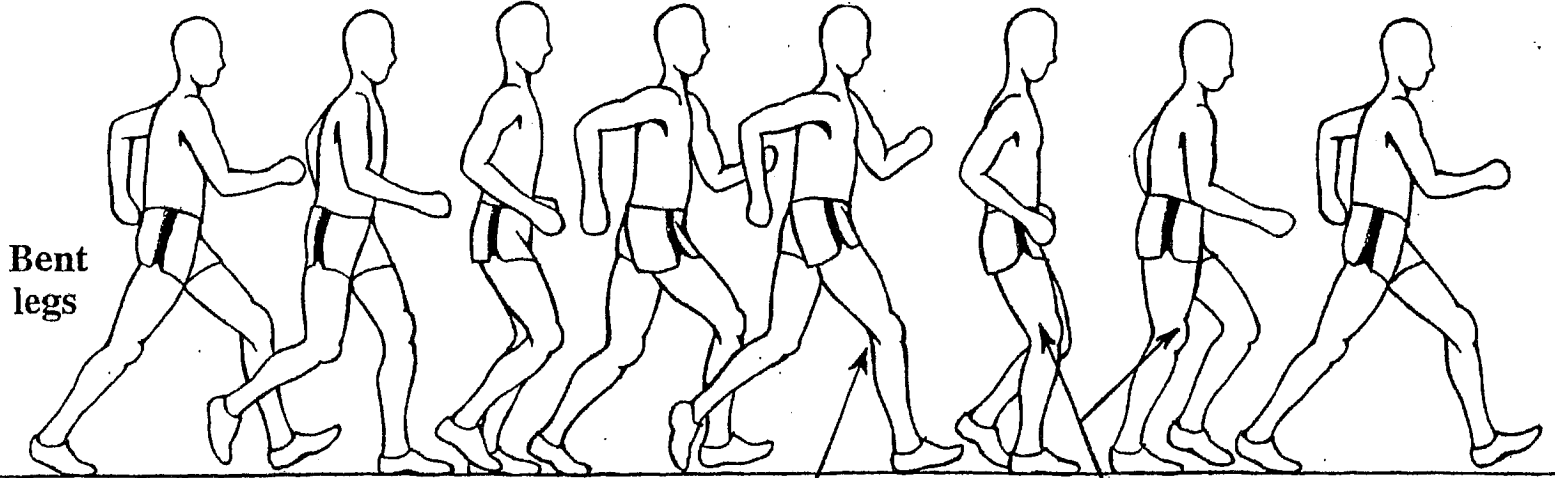
Loss of contact






The advancing leg must be straight at the knee joint when the heel contacts the ground.

The bending of one or both knees is easily detected by the judges.

Bent-knee race walking promotes the incorrect use of the large quadriceps muscles to help thrust the walker forward and can also cause a loss of contact. You want to land with a straight leg, leaving the quadriceps relaxed and smoothly pull and push the ground back underneath and behind you with your hamstring and hip muscles. A good heel pull as soon as the heel touches will also help to straighten the knee joint. Bent-leg quadriceps thrusting of the body up and over the ground with each step is what runners do.



The leg must be straightened (not bent at the knee) from the moment of first contact with the ground all the way back to at least the vertical upright position.

When a race walking judge sees a competitor in danger of breaking one or both race walking rules, he/she calls out the violation to the walker and at the same time shows them a yellow paddle. On opposite sides of this sign are the symbols for loss of contact ( or ) and bent knee(s) . These "in danger of" calls are known as CAUTIONS. Cautions alone never disqualify a walker from a race.

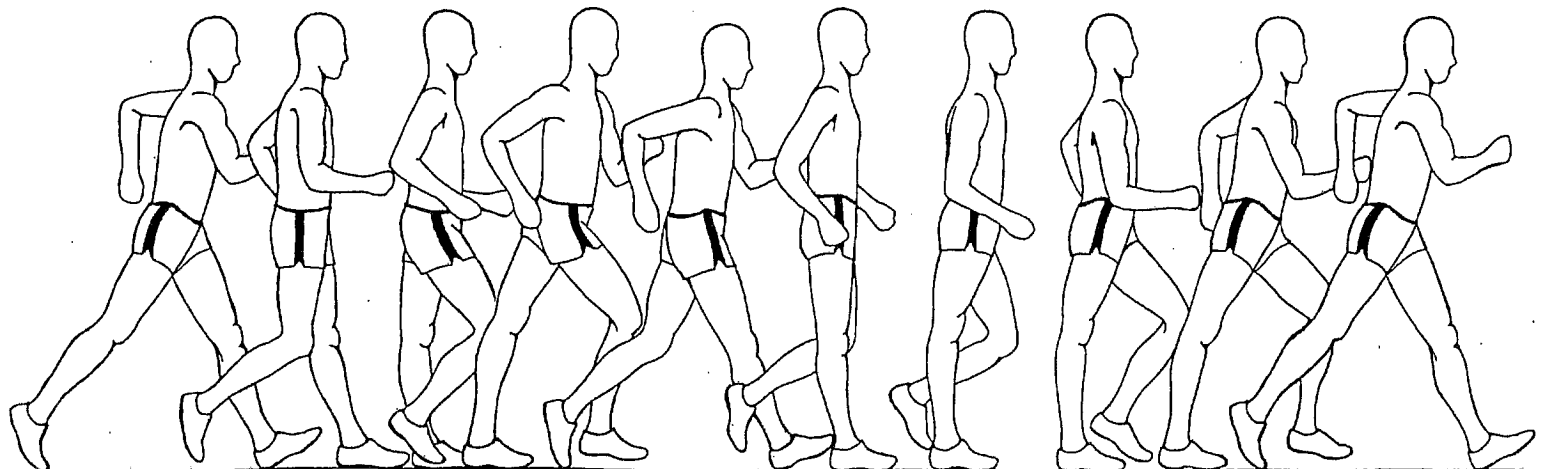
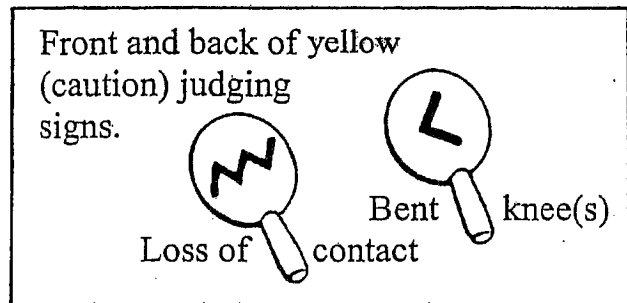
If a race walker is obviously losing contact with the ground and/or landing with bent knee(s), the judge will write a disqualification (RED CARD) on the walker without informing him or her about it. It takes a red card from THREE DIFFERENT JUDGES to disqualify a competitor.

A judge is only allowed to give one red card to a walker during a race. The yellow paddle can be shown twice—once only for bent knee(s) and once only for loss of contact.

Only the head judge has the authority to notify the walker that he or she has been disqualified. This notification is done verbally and by showing the walker a red paddle. When uncertain,

the judges are to give the benefit of the doubt to the walker. To repeat, race walk judges are concerned only with knee straightening and what looks to be sufficient contact with the ground.

To avoid the disappointment of disqualification, competitors must focus on developing and maintaining correct race walking technique during all of their training sessions and races.



Correct technique and legality