

Masters Champion Feature: Robyn Stevens

By Bob Burns

Photos courtesy of Robyn Stevens



ROBYN STEVENS, 20K RACE WALK WINNER, OLYMPIC TRIALS JULY 2021

The long and winding road that is Robyn Stevens' race walking career makes its latest stop in Gothenburg, Sweden.

While it's not Paris, the Scandinavian city is a nice alternative.

Stevens, a 41-year-old Olympic race walker from Vacaville, is competing in the World Athletics Championships, which began Aug. 13 and continue through Aug. 25 in Gothenburg.

"I have all this fitness, and I didn't get to show it in Paris," Stevens said. "I'd like to bring home three medals to show my gratitude to those who have supported me over the years."

She's referring to one of the most bittersweet wins of her career. Stevens won the women's 20-kilometer walk at the 2024 U.S. Olympic Trials in Oregon by two minutes. Her winning time of 1 hour, 37 minutes and 38 seconds was faster than all but seven of the men competing alongside the women.

But her dominant Trials win didn't translate to a trip to the Paris Olympics, as Stevens didn't meet the Olympic qualifying time (1:29:00) or have a high enough world ranking.

"I just wanted to defend my 2021 title," Stevens said.

Stevens' career, which started in the late 1990s when she was a gifted distance runner and race walker at Vacaville High School, has been a dizzying succession of highs and lows.

She was one of the top U.S. race walking prospects when she dropped out of Wisconsin-Parkside, where never found her footing after arriving on campus as a top recruit. Stevens quit the sport altogether 2003 due to an eating disorder.

"I used to think people had eating disorders because they wanted attention," Stevens said. "I know now that's not true. For me, it was embarrassing. It was a survival thing. If I didn't address it, it could be deadly."

She returned to the Bay Area, attended San Jose State, read all she could about nutrition and regained her health. She worked for a financial planning firm and did promotional work for a radio station, among other jobs.

Stevens returned to the sport in 2015, as a runner. Soon after, she crashed her head into a door frame and was ordered by her doctor not to run, lest she trigger more migraines. But he did give her the OK to walk, and she was back to the races after a 12-year hiatus.

Stevens received immediate encouragement from two old acquaintances, nationally ranked racewalker Susan Armenta, and Claudia Wilde, Robyn's youth coach.

Armenta coached Stevens to a spot in the 2016 U.S. Olympic Trials, and Wilde has provided invaluable moral and financial support.

"Susan is my race walk hero," Stevens said. "Her technique was so beautiful, so graceful – like a dancer," Stevens said. "And Claudia is great at helping me get out of my way."

Since 2017, Stevens has ranked first in the U.S. in the 20-kilometer walk three times and first in the 50-kilometer event twice. She won the 2021 U.S. Trials at 20k then finished a credible 33rd in a field of 58 women walkers at the Tokyo Olympics.

In 2022, on the day before her 39th birthday, Stevens walked perhaps her finest effort, setting U.S. and NACAC (North American, Central American and Caribbean) records in the 35-kilometer walk in 2:49:29.

"I always knew Robyn could be our No. 1 race walker," Armenta said. "But I also felt she had the talent to be one of the top international race walkers as well."

Stevens' rise to the top of the U.S. ladder coincided with a different, more troubling sort of low.

With Armenta unable to provide the full-time coaching they both knew she needed, Stevens began training under Andreas "Dre" Gustafsson in 2017.

Stevens has most recently been coached by Jacinto Garzon, a highly regarded Spanish coach. She trains with Garzon's group in southern Spain for two or three months and communicates with him online the rest of the year.

Said Wilde, her longtime supporter: “Once she went to the Spanish coach, she blossomed like a flower.”

Stevens said the disappointment of watching the Paris Olympic events on NBC was mitigated by the joy she felt over her training group’s success. Alvaro Martin and Martina Perez won a gold medal for Spain in the marathon mixed relay, and Perez won a silver medal in the 20-kilometer race.

In fact, the more Stevens talks about the joy of the Olympics, the more she seems to refute her earlier claim that it’s time to retire. “I’m living with my mom and I’m 41,” she said. “It’s time to move on.”

On second thought ...

“I’m still going to race,” Stevens said. “I just can’t do it full time. But I still want to be around the Pacific Association walking community. The George Kleeman Grant I got from the Pacific Association Foundation helped me get this far, and I’m extremely appreciative. I want to help the next generation of walkers.”

Armenta chuckles when asked whether she thinks Stevens is ready to walk away.

“She does still love race walking,” Armenta said. “If you feel you have more in the tank, it’s hard to give it up.”



ROBYN, IN ACTION AT THE 2021 OLYMPIC MARATHON TRIALS.