

Vacaville couple are the nation's top race walkers



Robyn Stevens and Nick Christie celebrate their victories in the 35K and 50K race walks, respectively, at the U.S. National Championships in Santee, CA, on February 28, 2021. (contributed photo — Paul Nestor).

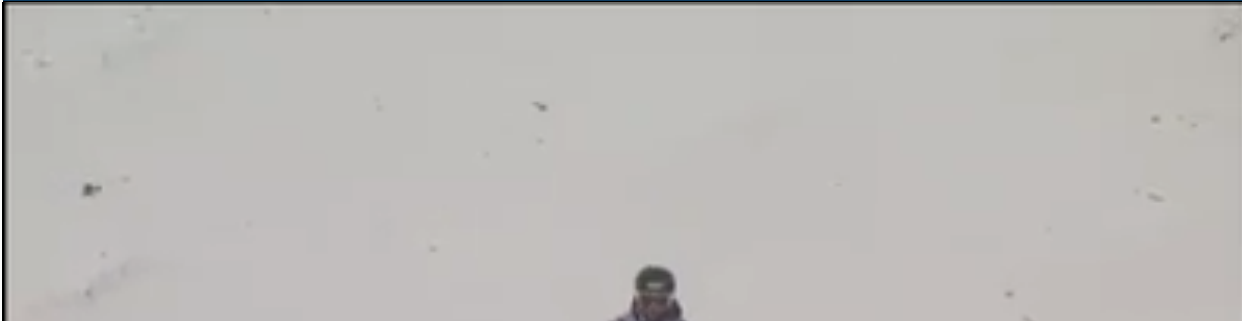
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Robyn Stevens was a sophomore at Vacaville High when she saw race walking by elite, Olympic-level walkers for the first time at the Stanford Invitational in October 1998.

Claudia Wilde, her club coach for the West Wind Flyers from Fairfield, had taught everybody on the team all the track and field events, including race walking.





"I had been a dancer, but my parents said I had to choose between track and field, soccer and dance," recalled Stevens. "Claudia said, 'If you stick with me I can get you a scholarship anywhere and probably into the Olympics.' So of the three sports, I was like, 'I'm going to stick with track and field.' But I really loved dance so when I saw race walk for the first time done by the elites, it reminded me of 'A Chorus Line,' which was a dance that Baryshnikov was in, and I was like, 'All right, I get to kill two birds with one stone. I don't have to give up dance after all if I race walk.'"

Stevens and her partner, Nick Christie, are now the two fastest race walkers in the womens' and men's divisions in the United States, and both have a very good shot at competing in the Olympics in Tokyo that is scheduled for August. They have won every major head-to-head competition from one mile to 50K (about 31 miles) the last few years.

Christie, who was born in Fairfield but raised in San Diego, met Stevens through their mutual sport. They now make their home in Vacaville.

"After we both won the USA 20km Nationals in Tustin in 2019 we decided to meet up at the California Poppy Super Bloom in Lake Elsinore," said Christie. "After that we had a lengthy training camp in the Spanish countryside and a rendezvous in the Azores of Portugal and the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Through our racing and travel together we had an opportunity to truly get to know each other and have been inseparable since."

In order to qualify for the Olympics, each has to be in the top 60 in the world. Stevens is 49th fastest in the 20K, while Christie is sitting at 59th in the 50K.

Last weekend at the USA National Championships in Santee (San Diego County), Christie won the 50K race and Stevens won the 35K. The Olympic event for women is the 20K, so Stevens used the 35K race to qualify for the 2022 World Championships.

Christie and Stevens will both compete in the Olympic Team Trials in late June in Eugene, Ore. Invitations to the Olympics will be mailed in early July.

Although race walking is a foot race, it is different from running in that one foot must be in contact with the ground at all times. This is assessed by race judges. The sport has been in the Olympics since 1904 when it was part of what was called the all-arounder, a precursor to the decathlon. By 1908 it was its own Olympic event.

Christie, who had done the hurdles, pole vault and cross country in high school, attended Cuyamaca Community College in Rancho San Diego. The cross country coach there was two-time Olympic race walker Tim Seaman.

"When I met Tim Seaman he said, 'If anybody wants to try this out I'll get you to the Olympic trials in a year,'" said Christie. "And I was like, 'That sounds pretty cool.' So then I tried it and I did pretty well and the big carrot on the stick was he said, 'If you can do this time in a few months, then you can qualify for the World Cup in Russia and compete for Team USA there.' And I was like, okay, done, I'm all in."



“I guess success motivates continuing on,” said Christie. “And I just like the technical aspect of it, technical and endurance. It kind of mixes the stuff I like about the hurdles and the pole vault and endurance because I did those kinds of events in high school.”

As a newcomer, he didn’t meet the time standard to make the Olympics in 2012 and just missed the standard in 2016. But with the current points system, he is in a good position to make Team USA this year.

The next big tests for Christie and Stevens will be the Pan American Cup Trials in late March or the beginning of April and the Pan American Cup May 8-9 in Guayaquil, Ecuador.

Stevens was a track and field and cross country star at Vacaville High, where she ran the mile, two-mile, 800 meters and the 4-by-400-meter race. She still holds the girls’ school record for the mile, an event in which she placed fifth in the state. In the 1999 Junior Nationals, after she won the 10k race walk, she then ran the 5k and placed fourth — seconds off of third.

But finding a college where she could race walk was a big challenge. She was recruited by scads of D-1 colleges and every Ivy League college for running and academics, but none of them had a good program for race walking.

“I was a four-time defending undefeated champion in race walk,” said Stevens. “And it was very uncommon for race walkers to also be successful runners. So I think that was a surprise when I came on the scene. It wasn’t something they knew how to address when advising for college. So they didn’t really know what to recommend.”

She found a small school in Wisconsin that offered race walking, but it was not very competitive for her and she also developed an eating disorder. So she moved back to California in 2003 and graduated from San Jose State.

She qualified for the Olympic Trials in 2004 but an injury related to her eating disorder prevented her from competing in them and she gave up race walking to concentrate on getting healthy.

“I knew I needed to get help,” said Stevens.

She overcame the disorder and returned to her sport in 2015.

Christie noted that the 50K will be the last ever in the Olympics this year, as it will be switched to the 35K in succeeding years. So, if he makes it to the Olympics, he said he might run the 50K “just for the nostalgia” along with the 20K, back-to-back on the same day.

Prior to last weekend’s meet in San Diego, the last time the pair raced competitively was on Valentine’s Day, 2020. After COVID hit in full force in March, they have been sequestered near the town of Mojave for their training.

“We have a very good sponsor in Decathlon USA,” said Christie. “They helped us with equipment. We moved up to the mountains so we can get some altitude training in the desert. We’ve been able to train uninterrupted. When we’ve been snowed in we have a treadmill that we got with a grant. And we have a home gym for squats and deadlifts and other exercises.”

Stevens said that making the Olympics team has been her goal since she started competing in track and field at age 14. But neither she nor Christie would have ever guessed that race walking would punch their tickets.

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