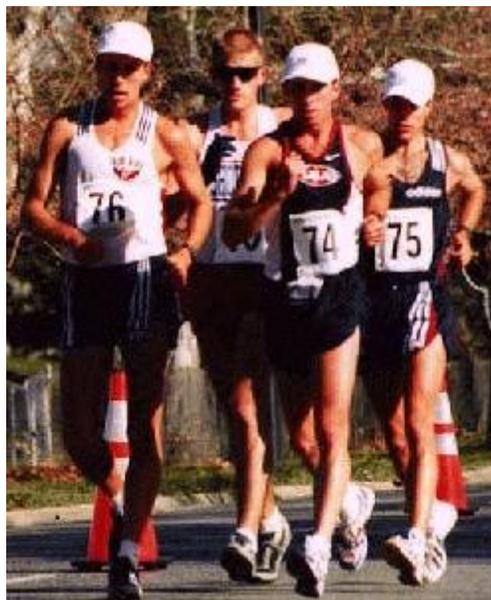


# 1997 National Invitational and U.S./Canadian 10 km and 20 km World Cup Trials



The 1997 World Cup of Racewalking will be held the weekend of April 19-20 in Podebrady, Czech Republic. The National Invitational Racewalk served as both the U.S. World Cup Trials and as an official "Proof of Fitness" competition for the Canadian team. Democracy may be flowering in Prague, but the "Cold War" was evident at Hanes Point on Sunday morning: A strong cold front tore into Washington, D.C. on the afternoon of the 22nd, seemingly following the Canadian walkers down from the north. After enjoying temperatures in the 70s on Saturday, the athletes were greeted by a reading of 20 degrees F. on race morning.

Mexi-Canadian Arturo Huerta took control from the gun, chasing the 1:22:50 World Championships qualifying standard imposed on him by the Canadian Federation. The course returned to its 1995 configuration--a coned-off lane of a two-lane drive around Hanes Point Park. Huerta was unfazed by the weather, a near-collision with an errant garbage truck and the frequent blasts of bus exhaust from the coaches carrying Japanese tourists to see the nascent cherry blossoms.

Arturo was chased by a group of four American athletes who stuck together to battle a strong head-wind on the "out" legs of the 2 km course: 1996 Olympian, Curt Clausen, top-ranked 20 km American Tim Seaman, 1997 50 km Champion Andrew Herman, and training partner Phillip Dunn. Trailing the lead pack were Gary Morgan, Dave McGovern, Rick Yeager and Will Van Axen, with Mike Rohl and Al Heppner not far behind; all keeping a conservative pace while eyeing the 5th and final spot on the US World Cup Squad.

The first 4 Americans hit 5 km in a brisk-but-not-too-crazy 21:48, with the trailers hitting the split at 22:08. After 5, McGovern pulled away from the trailing pack, while Morgan began a deceleration that continued to the end. The American "front walkers" traded the lead through 15 km, as did the trio of Van Axen, Rohl and Heppner. McGovern didn't have such luxury, fighting the wind alone while holding down the #5 spot for the duration of the race. Huerta, also racing alone, was not able to keep pace while battling the wind. He finished well ahead of his competitors, but was beaten by the clock at 1:24:37.

Over the last 5 km Seaman and Hermann broke from Dunn, then Clausen, with Seaman accelerating over the final kms to squeak under the World Championships "B" standard in 1:25:59. Hermann's 1:26:13 represents a

big pr. Clausen and Dunn should also be commended for their gutsy performances under tough conditions. McGovern, however, should be soundly berated for his spineless race, never really competing, and just walking fast enough to snatch his ticket to Prague from poor Al Heppner who really did race tough, pulling away from Rohl and Van Axen and closing a substantial gap to a mere 8 seconds behind McGovern...

Van Axen's race is a step in the right direction for a very talented athlete who first impressed me at the 1992 Empire State Games with a big win in the junior 5 km race as I was being handcuffed by the State Police in the middle of my 20 km race. But that's another story for another day... Rohl was also impressive, forgoing the 50 km this year to concentrate on 20 km.

And to the women...

The women's race was dominated by Canadian Olympian Tina Poitras, who battled the wind and Bob Briggs' ear-grating mispronunciation of her name, burying her American rivals. While the men's team was seemingly decided by 5 km, the women's squad was a tantalizing question mark to the finish--and beyond--as a late DQ was instrumental in deciding the identity of the elite 5.

'92 and '96 Olympian Victoria Herazo led the Americans from the get-go, but her lead never grew to more than 20 meters. Sarah Standley and Gretchen Eastler traded places several times, while Joanne Dow, Kristen Mullaney, Dana Yarbrough, Danielle Kirk and Debbie Van Orden trailed, separated by 10 - 20 meters each, all walking alone. This train of walkers remained on track to the finish, the only battles being between Standley and Eastler for the 2nd spot, and Mullaney's aparent defense of 5th in fighting off a late charge by Yarbrough.

In the end, Mullaney's victory was a house of cards--red cards. Her unfortunate post-race trip to Dairy Queen (DQ) moved Yarbrough up to 5th and onto the plane to Prague. Parkside Pal Kirk was left in the same unfortunate position as Heppner--a close-but-no-cigar 6th. Van Orden, weekend by the flu, was 2nd alternate.

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