

## PRAMESH PRASAD – A WORTHY RACEWALKING REPRESENTATIVE FOR FIJI AND AUSTRALIA

Members of our Australian walking community will all know **Pramesh Prasad**, one of our top masters walkers and a great ambassador for racewalking in Victoria. But you may not know Pramesh's part in the 1995 IAAF Racewalking World Cup, when he was instrumental in ensuring the first ever Fijian racewalking team was able to compete at that level.

You have to backtrack a further 5 years to pick up the story. Pramesh, who was born in Suva on 21 April 1974, had been a good runner in his younger years, competing over distances ranging from 800m to 10km. He was aged 13 when he won his first National Schools Championship, over 800m, and thought at that stage that his future lay in running.

However, that all changed in 1990 when Fiji was to host the Oceania Athletic Championships. The Games were scheduled for July of that year and would include a 20km racewalk. Although he would be only aged 16 at that time, his coach (who was also the National Athletics Coach for Fiji) asked him to try the walk. He had only a few months to work on his race walking technique and get ready. It was no easy task. As the only racewalker in Fiji, he was the subject of derision, with people calling him out as he was training at the track or on the road. But he persevered and duly represented Fiji in the Oceania Games 20km walk at 16 years of age.

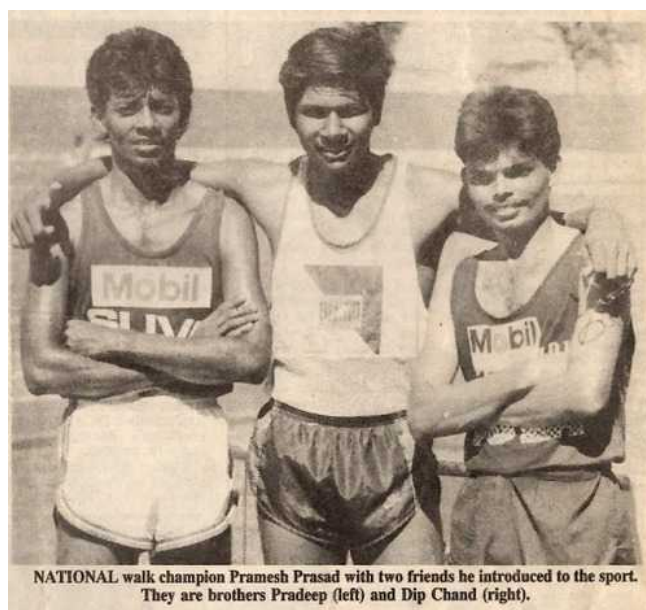
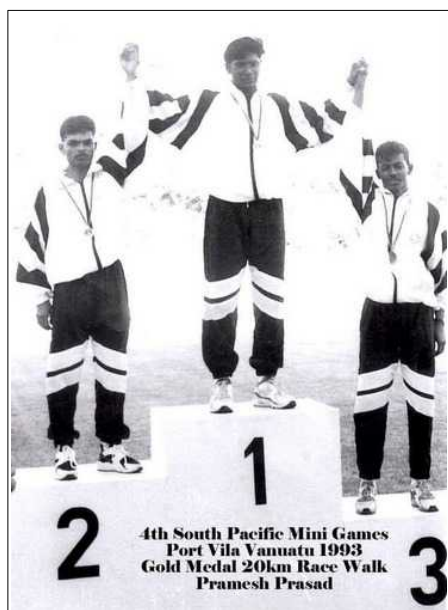


*16 year old Pramesh competes in the 1991 Oceania Athletics Championship 20km walk*

Opportunities started to flow as he improved in the sport. His next major achievement was a silver behind Brisbane based team mate **Caleb Maybir** in the 1991 Pacific Games 20km walk in New Guinea, his time a PB of 1:55:50. He was also working at that time to promote racewalking in Fiji, gradually building up a squad of racewalkers, including medical students **Dip and Pradeep Chand**.

With the South Pacific Mini Games to be contested in Vanuatu in December 1993, the Fijian Athletics Federation funded a number of athletes to live and train in Melbourne during the 1992/1993 period. Pramesh was one of the recipients of this largess, basing himself in Melbourne and joining Collingwood Harriers. He was billeted with Judy Mason in Epping for few months before moving in with the other Fijian athletes in Thornbury. His time here proved just the tonic he needed and he quickly set new Fijian 10km and 20km records (his 20km PB of 1:50:07 was done in the 1993 Victorian 20km Championship).

He was selected in the Fijian team for the 1993 South Pacific Mini Games, along with proteges Dip and Pradeep Chand, who had been runners before being talked by Pramesh into giving walking a try. For the record, Pramesh won gold in Vanuatu, while Dip took silver and Pradeep bronze.



*Pramesh takes gold ahead of Dip and Pradeep Chand in the 1993 South Pacific Mini Games*

The next question was - Could Fiji be talked into sending a walks team to the 1995 IAAF World Team Championships in Beijing? At least three 20km walkers would be needed and, by this stage, Pramesh had around 7 walkers in total in his squad.

With a lot of hard work and lobbying over the next year and a bit, it came to fruition when Fiji selected Pramesh, Dip and Pradeep to represent the country in the 1995 IAAF Racewalking World Cup, to be held in Beijing on 29-30 April of that year. Pramesh was the youngster of the three, having just celebrated his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday a week before.

The 1995 World Cup was one of the largest on record, with 330 walkers in total (226 men/104 women) from 36 countries. And Fiji was there as one of those 36! There was a strong Oceania team, with 8 Australians, 3 Fijians and 4 New Zealanders in the mix, a grand total of 15 walkers. Here is how they fared:

#### **IAAF Racewalking World Cup, Beijing, China, 29-30 April 1995 <sup>1</sup>**

##### **20km Walk Men**

15	Nicholas A'Hern	Australia	1:23:05
53	Dion Russell	Australia	1:28:25
71	Craig Barrett	New Zealand	1:31:52
81	Brent Vallance	Australia	1:34:44
95	Graeme Jones	New Zealand	1:39:08
99	Tony Sargisson	New Zealand	1:40:26
<b>106</b>	<b>Pradeep Chand</b>	<b>Fiji</b>	<b>1:52:30</b>
<b>108</b>	<b>Pramesh Prasad</b>	<b>Fiji</b>	<b>1:54:59</b>
<b>109</b>	<b>Dip Chand</b>	<b>Fiji</b>	<b>1:56:16</b>
—	Scott Nelson	New Zealand	DNF

##### **50km Walk Men**

41	Michael Harvey	Australia	4:05:58
68	Mark Thomas	Australia	4:22:28
73	Duane Cousins	Australia	4:31:29
77	Dominic McGrath	Australia	4:36:29
—	Mark Donahoo	Australia	DNF

##### **20km Walk Women**

5	Kerry Saxby-Junna	Australia	42:58
24	Anne Manning	Australia	45:26
40	Teresa Letherby	Australia	46:23
53	Wendy Muldoon	Australia	47:56

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1995\\_IAAF\\_World\\_Race\\_Walking\\_Cup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1995_IAAF_World_Race_Walking_Cup)

54	Jane Barbour	Australia	47:58
84	Rachel Gibbon	New Zealand	51:02
96	Lynley Mathieson	New Zealand	57:13
—	Jenny Jones-Billington	New Zealand	DNF



*Pradeep, Pramesh and Dip at the 1995 World Race Walking Cup in Beijing*

Fiji was keen to build on this initial success on the world stage and decided to further fund walking development. VRWC President and senior Australian coach Harry Summers was seconded as the inaugural Fijian National Walks Coach and travelled to Fiji to give a series of coaching seminars and guide the walkers to further improvement.

Pramesh was now back living in Melbourne and had decided to retire and pursue his career. Dip and Pradeep were keen to kick on and moved to Melbourne to race, while they completed their medical training. They were regulars at our VRWC competition at Middle Park during the next few years and I had many friendly races against them.

Fiji sent walkers to the next 4 IAAF Racewalking World Cups (1997, 1999, 2002 and 2004) but the required improvement was not forthcoming and the funding dried up. Sadly, since 2004, there has been little racewalking action within Fijian athletics. Oceania Athletics was never able to build on the initial successes in 1995 and 1997 and it all spluttered out over the ensuing years.

**20km Walk, IAAF Racewalking World Cup, Podebrady, Czech Republic, Saturday 19 April 1997 <sup>2</sup>**

131	Dip Chand	Fiji	1:50:29
132	Pradeep Chand	Fiji	1:50:31
133	Caleb Maybir	Fiji	1:55:07

**20km Walk, IAAF Racewalking World Cup, Mézidon-Canon, France, Saturday 1 May 1999 <sup>3</sup>**

119	Pradeep Chand	Fiji	1:58:47
120	Selwyn Shaniel Singh	Fiji	2:08:50

**20km Walk, IAAF Racewalking World Cup, Turin, Italy, Saturday 12 October 2002 <sup>4</sup>**

—	Pradeep Chand	Fiji	DQ
—	Manohar Maharaj	Fiji	DNF
—	Selwyn Shaniel Singh	Fiji	DNF

**20km Walk, IAAF Racewalking World Cup, Naumburg, Germany, Saturday 1 May 2004 <sup>5</sup>**

—	Avinesh Kumar	Fiji	DNF
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That should be the end of the story, but luckily there is a very nice addendum.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1997\\_IAAF\\_World\\_Race\\_Walking\\_Cup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1997_IAAF_World_Race_Walking_Cup)

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1999\\_IAAF\\_World\\_Race\\_Walking\\_Cup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1999_IAAF_World_Race_Walking_Cup)

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002\\_IAAF\\_World\\_Race\\_Walking\\_Cup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2002_IAAF_World_Race_Walking_Cup)

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004\\_IAAF\\_World\\_Race\\_Walking\\_Cup](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_IAAF_World_Race_Walking_Cup)

Pramesh had been living in Melbourne since 1995, had a good job, was married with a growing family and was probably long forgotten by those of us still racewalking. And no wonder - after a break of 20+ years, he weighed in at a whopping 125kg on his 41<sup>st</sup> birthday in April 2015.

This was a turning point for him - he decided to get fit again, with his first run on that fateful birthday - well, if you could call it a run. He tells me it took several stops to reach his target of one kilometre. 11 months later, in March 2016, he returned to racing, winning the M40 division of the Victorian Masters 5000m track walk in 30:21, and looking just like his old self.

He quickly improved, setting PB after PB in his first season back. That year saw him win 3 golds in the Australian Masters Championships in Adelaide in April. He followed with second place in the Victorian 15km roadwalk championship in May, finished the 10 Miles walk at the LBG Carnival in Canberra in June, won his division in the VMA 20km roadwalk later that same month, won silver in the Victorian 30km roadwalk championship in August, won the M40 division in the AMA 20km roadwalk championship in Adelaide a few weeks later, competed in the World Masters Championships in Perth in October (taking 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> placings in the walks) and then won 3 golds in the Pan Pacific Masters Games in Queensland. Not a bad first year back after 21 years away from the sport.

Since then, he has been a regular on the Victorian and Australian scene, and is now walking faster than ever.

He holds 4 Fijian National Records, more than anyone else, and was able to wear the Fijian colours again when he represented that country in the 2017 Oceania Area Championships in Suva, Fiji, and in the 2019 Oceania Championships in Townsville, Queensland.

That is a long way from the unfit plodder who couldn't run one kilometre in 2015!

Pramesh was keen on testing himself out over the longer walking distances. In September 2018, he won the Victorian 50km racewalking championship in a time of 4:56:55. The following year, in April 2019, he entered the 6 Hour Walk at our Coburg 24 Hour Carnival, winning with an impressive 56.512km. 2020 came and went with no further races, given the covid-19 pandemic, but come this year, he was ready for the next step and entered the 24 Hour Walk at our 2021 Coburg 24 Hour Carnival.



*Left: Pramesh finishes his first 50km in September 2018 at Middle Park in Melbourne  
Right: Pramesh in action in February 2020 at the Mentone Athletics Track*

His walk in the 2021 Coburg Carnival 24 Hour walk was an impressive performance. He headed out fast, using the full racewalking technique, and powered through to 52.693km in the first 6 hours. Then he switched to an efficient strolling action that continued to eat up the miles. He passed the 100km mark in 11:49:11 and reached the 100 mile mark in 20:43:42. From then he strolled a few laps to a total distance of 162.559km, his goal achieved. He had earned Centurion badge 81 for his efforts.

His PBs as of 2021 read as follows: 13:41 (3km), 23:50 (5km), 49:23 (10km), 1:44:14 (20km), 2:46:51 (30km), 4:56:55 (50km), 3:04 (Marathon Run), 11:49:11 (100km) and 20:43:42 (100 Miles).



*Pramesh finishes his 100 mile walk at Coburg, his time 20:43:42*

Pramesh is still working on ways of promoting race walking in Melbourne and in Fiji and is part of a great training group which meets each Monday at the Casey Fields track, a group which includes walkers Heather Carr, Kevin Cassidy, Albin Hess, Hsien Chiam, Marnie Grace, Kyle Bird, Brianna Briet and Ky Irshad, along with some runners.

Over the last couple of years since 2021, Pramesh has returned to running mode and is performing well. So well in fact, that he was selected as part of the Fijian team to compete in the Open Men's race at the World Cross Country Championships in Bathurst, NSW, on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> February 2023.



*Pramesh checking out the course in Bathurst the day before the World Cross Country race*

I was able to watch the races on TV and did manage to see Pramesh running as part of a group early in the event. But things did not go to plan. Let me explain. A very worrying storm front was scheduled to hit Bathurst late afternoon and the organisers were so concerned that they decided to start the final event (the Open Men's 10km) 30 minutes earlier. This was only announced 1 hour before the scheduled start time so you can imagine the team managers running around

looking for their athletes to let them know to bring forward their warm ups. Anyway, word spread and the race got underway at the earlier time. But the stormy conditions came through even earlier than expected, with the last laps being run in gale force winds, thunder and lightning and heavy rains. This forced the organisers to stop the back of the field at the start of the last lap. Pramesh was one of those effected, and the results show him as a DNF, along with a number of others. It was a disappointing outcome for him, but it was still wonderful to be part of the World Cross Country experience. (PS: There is a push to get World Athletics to give all the runners a position and points in both the Open Men's and Open Women's championships, where runners were stopped.)

And his WCC representation has an interesting footnote. At 13 years old, Pramesh was selected in the Fijian Junior team for the 1988 World Cross Country Championship in NZ. He was first reserve but could not travel with the team as he was too young. He had the uniform, visa and bag packed and was ready to go if any junior team member couldn't race. Now finally after 34 years, his dream to compete in the World Cross Country Championship came true. From being the youngest athlete in 1988 World Cross Country Championship to now being the oldest athlete ever to compete in the Open Mens in 2023 at age 48.

His final thought: *We should never stop running after our dream, if you work hard, we can get there.*

Of course, this comeback has been a big ask for Pramesh, given he and his wife were already busy with their family of 4 children and with their own work commitments. So well done to all the family for all their support – he wouldn't have got back to where he is without a big family effort.

Keep up the good work, Pramesh! We expect to see many more fine performances from you over the next few years.

Tim Erickson  
20<sup>th</sup> March 2023