

Strategy and tactics of racing by Julian Hopkins (Former National Event Coach)

It is probably best to start by making clear the difference between strategy and tactics. A strategy is a plan of campaign made before the start of the event. The tactics are on the spur of the moment, changes to this plan in the heat of the competition to gain a winning advantage. In some events tactics are much more important than a strategy whilst in others the reverse is true. For example, in middle-distance running tactics are very important. At the running speeds involved, wind resistance slowing the runner is appreciable. Consequently, it is a considerable disadvantage to take the lead. In race walking, as speeds are only about half those in middle-distance running, the wind resistance turns out to be only about a quarter as much. Here there is no reasonable advantage to be gained by following. Also, when running, it is far easier to change your speed suddenly than it is when race walking where the possibility of disqualification is always lurking round the corner. This more or less removes the possibility of sudden tactical bursts in race walking

For these reasons, race walking events are largely strategic like the marathon. In other words, they are more like time trials for most of the competitors. However, this is not to say that investing strategic possibilities do not exist in race walking. Let us have a look at some of them.

As only a small percentage of the competitors usually have a chance of winning, I shall split strategies into those designed to give the best possible performance and those designed to win the race. In the first group, for example, a walker could walk at an even pace according to a schedule designed to give him a personal best performance for the distance. For success a walker will need to have developed a good sense of pace judgement especially for road races in which split times might be inaccurate or not given at all. Another possibility would be for the walker to try to keep up with another walker whose personal best performance for the distance is known to be a little faster than his own. Such a strategy is not without its dangers for the other walker might not walk up to his normal form. Again, this is where good pace judgement is necessary for this will tell our walker that his opponent is walking below par. When we come to strategies designed to win a race, a number of possibilities emerge. Firstly, a walker could set an even pace which he knows he can maintain to the finish but the opposition cannot. He must expect to have company for at least part of the race. Here again pace judgement will be important. This is the sort of strategy a walker could adopt if he knew that he was superior to the opposition. Secondly, a walker could start very quickly and attempt to get away from the field early on so that he could relax and walk his own race. This strategy is risky and should only be used by a walker who has a clear margin of superiority. This was the case with Ken Matthews who used this strategy in many of his best races. However, in his greatest victory - in the 1964 Olympic 20 km event - it is noticeable that he walked at a very even pace. Thirdly, a walker could go with the leaders and attempt to break away at an opportune moment probably in the closing stages. In such a situation, tactics will play a greater part as each walker tries to gain an advantage. This strategy is usually employed by most of the leading contenders in major championships as there is little to choose between the competitors. It was used by Paul Nihill in most of his major successes where he kicked hard in the closing stages. Such a strategy would also seem appropriate in adverse conditions such as great heat or very strong wind. In such situations, a more conservative strategy seems called for because it is difficult to gauge the effect of the conditions.

Although I have divided strategies into those designed to produce the best possible performance and those designed to win, it is possible that the first group may lead to victory. This could happen if the walker overestimates the opposition and in with his over conservative strategy, finds himself in the lead. Alternatively, the opposition might

misjudge their pace and blow up or underestimate the effect of poor conditions on their performance. It is certainly wise for a walker to go into an event with a clear plan of campaign in mind and to stick to it. Too often walkers make mistakes - understandably - in the heat of competition. They become over excited and go off with the leaders or walk faster than their even-pace schedule. Alternatively, they might lose confidence and let the leaders get too far ahead or walk slower than their even pace schedule. To gain experience of various strategies it is useful for walkers to experiment in less important traces. Here longer distance walkers can also experiment with their drinking schedule - what to take, how much and when?

Finally, a few words concerning tactics. On the track, some important running tactics also apply — a walker should not walk wide of the kerb on the bends (a lap one lane out is seven metres longer!), he should not walk directly behind an opponent but rather 'half a shoulder' so that his stride rythmn is not upset and so on. On the other hand, passing an opponent as quickly as possible and kicking for hone as late as possible in a close race are more dubious tactics in walking due to the risk of disqualification. On the road, natural variations in the course might present tactical possibilities. Some walkers are better uphill than others and will attempt to gain an advantage by putting in an effort over such a section of the course. Others with good basic speed and a safe technique might put in a burst downhill to gain a winning advantage. In longer races, a walker might take a gamble and put in a burst as an opponent slows for a drink at a feeding station. Indeed, correct feeding in a long race can sometimes affect the final outcome. In this article I hope I have shown that a little pre-race planning can go a long way towards ensuring that a walker makes the most of his abilities in a race. He should not only walk with his feet!



The importance of strategies was illustrated at the European Cup 20 km in 2009. In hot weather Yohann Diniz raced through the first 2km in 7:47, whereas Giorgio Rubino passed thought 2 km in 8:19. Rubino went on to win the race by nearly a minute, whereas Diniz finished 8th nearly 3 minutes behind the winner!

Giorgio Rubino

Yohann Diniz

