

The King of Racewalking

By [JEFF CHU | TOURCOING](#) Sunday, May. 23, 2004



MIND GAME: Korzeniowski plans victory: "I can't accept athletes who say, 'It's just not my day'"
JEFF HAYNES/AFP-GETTY IMAGES

As Robert Korzeniowski cruises around the track at his training base in the northern French town of Tourcoing, his body — tan, lithe, tautly muscled — obviously belongs to a world-class athlete. But his gait belongs to Monty Python's Ministry of Silly Walks. His legs do a speedy, almost balletic sashay. His arms pump hard, as if daring his bottom half to go faster. The Pole, world-record holder in the 50-km racewalk, is zooming. "When I train with him," says Norway's Kjersti Plätzer, the 2000 Olympic silver medalist in the women's 20 km, "he walks and I run. He's a god — the walker."

In Athens, Korzeniowski, the best racewalker of all time, will seek to gild his greatness with one last gold. He already holds three world titles and three Olympic golds, including two from 2000, when he became the first man ever to sweep the 20-km and 50-km races. He hasn't lost at 50 km, his specialty, since 1999. And he's set a new record in his last two 50-km races, clocking 3 hr. 36 min. 3 sec. at the World Championships in Paris last August. Korzeniowski, 35, admits his career has turned out so well that "I could finish happily any day." So why bother with Athens? "I still have Olympic dreams," he says, flashing the first of many smiles. "I'm giving myself a bonus." He wants it in gold.

Racewalking's weird look is one reason why the Olympic family treats it like a misunderstood stepchild. Walkers can blame the rules, which require that one foot touch the ground at all times and, from the time the lead foot hits the ground, the lead leg be fully straight. Sounds simple, but try doing it for the nearly four hours that it takes a world-class racer to cover the 50 km (nearly 8 km more than a marathon). "Now I realize it looks strange," Korzeniowski says during a coffee break in his Tourcoing apartment. He didn't as a teen. The sport was popular in the part of southeast Poland where he grew up, so "you weren't just a single person with a funny walk." In any case, he was just glad to be doing something sporty. At 9, he'd come down with a rheumatic illness. Sports were off-limits. He recovered at 13, "a present from God," he says. "When I started to do sports, it was just to be part of the normal population."

His first choice: judo. "Bruce Lee!" he exclaims, a grin stretching across his bronzed face. "Everybody wanted to be Bruce Lee!" But this was Poland, 1981 — the communist regime had imposed martial law to suppress opposition, and the authorities didn't like the idea of all those teens gathering nightly to chop and kick like the kung-fu movie star. They ended the training sessions "under the pretext of renovating the gym," Korzeniowski says. "Of course they never finished, and athletics was the only session open." Walking was his destiny.

In 1984, he qualified for the Polish championships, where he placed last. But competing on a big stage planted a seed: "I started to dream." The dreams fueled his drive, and led to strong results at major ju-nior meets like the World Student Games in 1991. But success, he now says, convinced him he was better than he actually was. "Thanks to God, I was disqualified at the '92 Olympics and again in '93 [at the Worlds]," he says. Disqualification is common among walkers, but it doesn't usually inspire an epiphany, as it did for Korzeniowski. "It was a big warning for me — don't be arrogant, don't think you know how to walk."

At first, failure sent him spiraling. Some among the Polish media mocked him. "They were guessing when in a race I would be disqualified — 25 km? 30 km?" he says. "Everyone said, 'Leave the sport.' I had no financial support, no mental support. I was a single soldier in the big world." And

he fought back, transforming himself psychologically. "I realized I was just playing the game with everyone else in a race," he says. "But I needed to be the master of my own strategy, to make it my competition, to make them respond to me." Method became his mantra, steady speed his trademark. "I have to know exactly the effort I'm putting out at 30 km, at 40 km," he explains. Plätzer praises his technique: "He looks exactly the same at 1 km as he does at 50 km. He keeps his rhythm."

His training is planned to the minute — a "really easy" 15-km walk takes 72. Race-pace 1-km sprints are 4 min. 19 sec., which would set him up for a world record in Athens. "I don't think I'm physically more talented than other athletes," he says. "The difference is my ability to analyze." Says his sister Silwia, who is also on the Polish team: "He knows his body. He knows exactly how to organize."

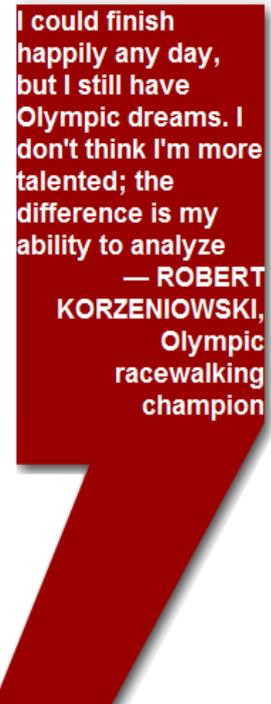
His strategy works — since 1995, the only 50 km Korzeniowski hasn't won was at the 1999 World Championships in Spain. He was disqualified, a flashback to past form that, unfortunately for his rivals, spurred him on for the 2000 Games, where he became the first man

ever to sweep the 20 km and 50 km. "I needed a huge challenge after Seville," he says, "something to help me forget."

In Athens, he'll defend his 50-km title. His race starts Aug. 20. Yes, that's right: the Olympic calendar may say Aug. 27, but for the planning-obsessed Korzeniowski, "it actually starts a week before." The 50-km race is so grueling, he says, that it will punish those who don't prepare fully during that last week, from tracking the weather in preparation for the heat and humidity to making race weight (the 1.68-m-tall Korzeniowski's is a trim 62 kg) to readying the right electrolyte-replacement drinks (he'll consume 4 L of those and 4 L of water). "There are no surprises," he says. "If I don't win, there was something wrong with my plan of action."

One last gold would not only cement his place as walking's greatest, but also boost his post-Athens work — promoting walking and fitness. "Walking develops the whole body. And it's a cheap sport!" he says, in full salesman mode. "You can train anytime, anywhere." He has helped to start eight athletics clubs in Poland and owns a sportswear line, appropriately branded Walker. He coaches his sister Silwia. He's joined tennis' Williams sisters as a face of the McDonald's Go Active! fitness campaign. "I'm promoting walking," Korzeniowski says, "not their food."

But his main post-Athens goal is modest. His career has allowed him just two months a year at home in Krakow. "I dream about weekends at home," he says, especially since he and his wife will welcome a new daughter, to be named Rozalia, next month. (Their first, Angelica, is 12.) "I want to be with my family, play checkers and Monopoly, see my friends — an ordinary life," he says. After 20 years of walking, logging thousands of kilometers all over the world, the chance to put his feet up would truly be golden.



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