

## Racewalking in Ghana, West Africa

By Dave McGovern



Leaving the excessively air conditioned Kotuku International Airport, I was momentarily blinded by the bright afternoon sun and struck by the stifling African heat. Vincent "Visco" Asumang, Ghana's

famed "Ace Walker," recognized me first—not a tough assignment as mine was the only white face in a sea of locals and visiting ex-patriots. Asumang, an officer with the National Fire Service, gained a certain amount of notoriety in Ghana a decade ago when he walked across, then around the perimeter of Ghana for charity and to raise sponsorship money for his eponymous club, the Visco Walking Club.

Navigating our way by motorcycle through the capital city of Accra, I was astonished by the degree of poverty in this, one of Africa's most developed nations. With a population of some 3 million, Accra has only a handful of buildings over two stories tall, and none over five. Large swaths of the city are nothing more than shanty villages with dirt paths and no running water. Streetlights are rare beyond the major roads and the per capita income hovers in the vicinity of \$500 per year. But in this difficult environment there is a growing racewalking community. Although there are few "masters" walkers over the age of 40, there are many excellent walkers in their 20s and 30s, and a rapidly growing flock of youth walkers. There are numerous 5K to 150K races held throughout that nation, with many drawing 50 or more competitors.

During my first visit to Ghana in May of 2000 I was scheduled to give a number of clinics across the country, but I spent a great deal of time doing television, radio and newspaper interviews instead of working with walkers as much as possible. I questioned this apparent waste of our precious little time together. Wouldn't my time in country be better spent working with the athletes to get



Ghana's top young walkers after a competition at the Visco walking academy.



The barefoot walker.

them ready for the World Cup? As it turns out, my concerns were short sighted. The Big Picture was the development of racewalking as a sport in Ghana, and Vincent was a master of self promotion. Now six years on, Ghana has a burgeoning racewalking population, fueled by Asumang's efforts, including his Accra-based Visco Walking Club, and the Visco Walking Academy in his hometown of Cape Coast. With press coverage comes credibility, and with credibility sponsorship followed. Alitalia came through with tickets for the 2002 World Cup in Torino; Puma has supplied uniforms for the national team; and followers of the "Ghana Walk News" on the internet no doubt can recite the names Energizer,

Parlay's Biscuits, Voltic Mineral Water, Biriwa Beach Hotel, and of course Elephant Ointment, in their sleep.

The best walkers have improved dramatically in the past several years. At the recent World Cup Trials 20 kilometer race in the heat and humidity of Cape Coast, Ahmed Tijani Sanni of the Ghana Armed Forces (Navy) walked 1:32:53 for the win, a time that would have placed him in the top six at the U.S. World Cup trials, which were held under much more favorable weather conditions. Stanley Brimah and Bright Atta were also well under 1:34:00—the U.S. Olympic Trials qualifying time. Jacqueline Aku Bludo of the Ghana Police Service is a rising star, edging closer to the 1:50:00 standard for



20 kilometers. And there are literally dozens of walkers nipping at their heels hoping to knock them off the podium, including many athletes in their teens and younger.

What makes their achievements even more amazing are the conditions under which they train and race. Of course the heat and humidity are oppressive, but the lack of what we would deem acceptable training facilities and equipment is a further barrier to success. The national stadium in Accra houses the only real track in the nation—and it is in less-than-ideal condition. And despite donations of shoes and money by American racewalkers, many young athletes go without proper footwear or race barefoot.

This is partly my own fault. As coach to the national team I've been collecting shoes for the top-level walkers for years but I didn't realize how successful Vincent's Walking Academy has been at recruiting younger walkers. It is these youth walkers—the future of racewalking in Ghana—that largely go barefoot. I'll

take what I can get, but my focus has shifted to finding outgrown racewalking shoes and running racing flats worn by U.S. teenagers rather than adults. Hopefully by the next World Cup trial barefoot walkers will be the exception rather than the rule.

Vincent still walks in the 4:40 range for 50 kilometers. It's good enough to allow him to compete as a member of Ghana's National Team in the World Cup and other international competitions but he looks forward to the day when he'll be knocked off by the rapidly improving younger generation of walkers. As the father of racewalking in Ghana, Asumang continues to serve as an inspiration to these young walkers. What he and these dedicated young walkers don't know is how much their incredible determination in the face of adversity serve as an inspiration to us. ♦

If you would like to make a donation to support racewalking in Ghana, please send racewalking shoes or running "racing flats" only to: Shoes for Ghana, 96 Maiden Lane,

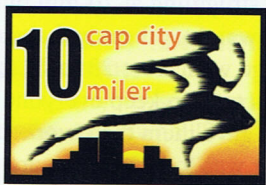


"Ace Walker" Vincent Asumang with Ghanaian Champions Jacqueline Aku Bludo and Stanley Brimah.

Kingston, NY 12401. An assortment of Ghana racewalking T-shirts are for sale at [www.racewalking.org](http://www.racewalking.org).

**Dave McGovern** is a member of the U.S. National Racewalking Team and the author of **The Complete Guide to Racewalking** and **The Complete Guide to Marathon Walking**. Visit his web site at [www.racewalking.org](http://www.racewalking.org).

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