



## Walking the Path to Glory

By Judy Heller

A life-size bronze statue of Yueling Chen stands in the main square of her hometown of Tieling City in the Manchurian province of Lianing, tucked away in the northeast of the People's Republic of China. She's not a political leader, not a military hero, not an astronaut. In 1992, Chen walked — racewalked, to be exact — her way to statue-worthy glory.

At the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain, then 19-year-old Yueling Chen became the first-ever Chinese Olympic track gold medalist, male or female, by winning the women's inaugural 10K (six miles) racewalk with a time of 44:32 minutes. Her country showered her with cash and gifts, as well as a big bronze statue — an honor befitting a national hero.

Today, 16 women have qualified for the 20K (12 miles) Olympic Racewalking Trials being held in Sacramento, California, on July 16. The athletes all achieved times of 1:48:00 or faster, but so far, only six have qualified with the “A-Standard” time of 1:36:00. At the Trials, the top three finishers will represent the United States at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney, Australia. Now 27 years old and a U.S. citizen, the diminutive Yueling Chen (she stands just 5 feet 1 inch) is a top contender for the Olympic team.

Growing up in the Chinese countryside, Chen enjoyed music, singing, and painting. But it is the custom in mainland China for the authorities of the state to determine a child's path. So, at the age of ten, Chen was directed not to the arts, but to sports and to running track in particular. At the same time that Chen was practicing her sprint drills, racewalking appeared on the world track scene. Her coach suggested she try her hand — or rather, her feet — at it.

Turns out she was a natural. Chen competed nationally and internationally throughout her teen years, winning Olympic gold at the tender age of 19. Soon after that, she was ready for her next challenge. As a little girl, Chen had heard people speaking English, and she'd always wanted to learn. She was eager to come to the United States to study the language, but in order to leave China she had to get approval from her coach, school, and state. She remembers the president of

the Chinese Olympic Committee telling her, “You did your best for China. Now you can do whatever you want.”

And so she did. In 1993, with the guidance of Derek Boosey, Olympic competitor and racewalking coach to Canada, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Korea, China, and Australia, Chen enrolled at Brigham Young University in an English-language program. She moved to San Diego in 1994 and applied for a U.S. green card.

Her life in China had been a controlled environment of training and studies. Here in the United States, Yueling enjoys gardening, training, and working as a director of Asian marketing for Imagenetix, Inc., a distributor of health and nutritional products. She also attends, part-time, Palomar College, where she is studying for a general degree.

As if working full-time, studying part-time, and training for the Olympics weren't enough, she is actively involved in charity work. She's an honorary spokesperson for the National Kidney Foundation, San Diego County's Union of Pan Asian Communities, and a nationwide series of health walks to raise money for the 2001 Summer National Senior Games. She was a presenter for the 1999 Special Olympics, and she walks to raise funds for the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, the Susan G. Koman Breast Cancer Foundation, and the World Wildlife Fund. She also conducts racewalk clinics.

Today, with so much of her time and energy devoted to racewalking, it's hard to believe that Chen all but gave up her sport when she first arrived in the United States. But six years later, in 1999, she had a change of heart. She told *Women's Sports and Fitness* magazine, “I'm not too old. I'll do it to challenge myself, to see what will happen. The first day I went out and did a 6K. I felt so good I knew I could compete again.”

Chen set two goals: to become a U.S. citizen and to racewalk in the 2000 Olympics for the United States. She completed her five-year residency (mandatory for citizenship) in the fall of 1999, then discovered she was up against a backlog of immigration cases. She was told her naturalization might not be processed for 12 to 18 months, long after the Olympic Trials and maybe even the Olympics themselves. Meanwhile, as Boosey and others worked to get her application moved up in the bureaucratic process, Chen had to focus on her training (usually six days a week, about 50 to 60 miles) and on qualifying for the Trials.

Which she did on January 23, 2000, with a time of 1:35:45 in the 20K (12.4 miles). Then, with the help of U.S. Representative Calvin Dooley, Chen was sworn in as a U.S. citizen on April 12 in San Diego, California. There are still the technicalities of approval from China and international authorities, but it seems like she has jumped over her greatest hurdle — obtaining citizenship in time for the Olympics.

Boosey, her mentor and friend, says that one of the reasons Chen has chosen to train for the Olympics is to be more a part of the United States. She loves her adopted homeland and wants to be a flame that ignites American women's interest in racewalking, just as Mary Lou Retton did for gymnastics. This tough competitor may be just the person to do it. “Yueling has physical talent and a positive attitude,” says Boosey. “She has dedication — a spirit that never says die. She is not afraid of hard work and races to win.”

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