

TWO WHEELING

FOR MANY PEOPLE, THE WORD BMX BRINGS BACK TEEN MEMORIES OF RACING AROUND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD, JUMPING OBSTACLES AND SKIDDING AROUND CORNERS. BUT SINCE THE BEIJING OLYMPICS, BMX RACING HAS MOVED OUT OF THE BACKYARD AND ONTO THE MEDAL BOARD

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Eight riders stand poised on their bikes behind a barrier at the top of a steep incline. As the barrier drops, they fly down the slope and over the first series of hills. The amount of air gained over each crest directly corresponds to the speed of the rider. There is little to differentiate the pack.

As the riders angle around the first sweeping curve, two collide, taking each other out of the mêlée. The others swerve around them. Those that make it through have nerves of steel.

Every teenager goes through a stage of wanting a BMX bike; the epitome of street cool. But for some, the allure exerts its pull at a much earlier age. Florida-based Ryan Magin first got into BMX racing at the age of six. This started a love affair with the sport that has continued to this day, as he rose through the ranks to become a winning track racer.

While Magin is a passionate advocate of the sport, pushing thirty-years-old he has concerns about the longevity of racing as a career. "I do not think BMX can be a long-term career as the prize money is just not big enough," he begins. "The average pro BMX racer is struggling to make about US\$20,000 a year, with a select few doing over \$50,000. I feel that a normal career for most riders will be limited to [ending by their] late twenties." ⇒

LEFT: The field makes a jump in the Men's BMX cycling during the London 2012 Olympic Games.

Those that make it through have nerves of steel

This may be true for many riders, but then there are people like Sarah Walker, at the top of her game. At 24-years-old, Walker is an Olympic silver medal winning BMX racer from New Zealand. When Walker was ten-years-old, her family used to drive over an hour to the closest BMX track to watch her younger brother ride. "After two months of travelling back and forth, I had a go myself and absolutely loved it," she explains. "From that moment on, BMX was my favourite thing to do." Not much has changed.

Whether it was the hint of sibling rivalry, or the challenge of being involved in a male-dominated sport, Walker took these challenges in her stride. "There have always been more males in the sport and there probably always will be," she explains. "It's an extreme sport that requires you to be brave, and I think it's a lot easier for girls to be afraid of things."

"Although it would be nice to have more girls to ride with, it has been great for my development as a rider as I have always looked at what the guys are doing and expected the same of myself," she continues. "For example, when I first started, and right through to making the New Zealand team, having a brother that was two years younger meant that I couldn't let him be better than me. But to him, he couldn't be beaten by a girl, so the competition between us always pushed us to the next level."

At the 2012 Supercross in Norway, Walker dislocated her shoulder, which almost put her out of contention for the London Olympics. After a brief six-week recovery, she qualified at the World Championships, held in Birmingham, England. The rest is medal-winning history.

"Winning silver in London is one of my proudest moments," claims Walker. "Not just the part of riding the race, but because of the journey to get there. I dislocated my shoulder three months before the Olympics at a World Cup, and I didn't even know if I would make it to the Olympics. With a 75 – 90 percent chance of my shoulder re-dislocating, any crash in that time would be game over. I had a decision to make: do I want to play it safe and be at the London Olympics or do I want to risk not being at there at all but give myself every opportunity to win the gold medal? I chose gold."



Sarah Walker competes during the Women's BMX cycling at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

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Walker is philosophical about her mental battle to get to the London Olympics, after finishing fourth in Beijing four years before. The shoulder injury left her straddling the line between a healthy fear of further physical damage, and the desire to compete and win.

"At the Olympics, I thought about the same things I thought every day at training," Walker says. "I just thought about where I had to pedal, staying as smooth as possible on the jumps without losing speed, and to be aggressive in the corners. If someone was going to come near me, I had decided I would rather end up in a heap, lying on the track, than back off and let them go past me."

This attitude is vital when the track resembles something a six-year-old would create with a Scalextric racing car kit – all serpentine curves, rollers and large banked corners. These corners have a function apart from being one of the primary smash-and-crash sites through the races – the flat areas help the riders maintain speed.

But to the casual observer these are the areas to watch as they hold the ever-present element of danger that keeps race tension at nail-biting levels. Collisions are an inevitable part of the excitement, appealing to the same part of the human brain that can't look away from a car crash.

The London track in the Lee Valley VeloPark in East London featured an eight-metre-high starting ramp for the racers to generate speed. From there the list of features sounds like the percussion section of a band, with a berm jump, an S-bend transfer, a box jump and a rhythm section in the final straight for the men. The women tackled three jumps in the opening straight and a tunnel before the rhythm section.

Many of the Olympic racers did not fully appreciate the musical composition of the track. A number of riders hit the dirt throughout the races. Some were controlled falls, but most were carnage, with large sections of the pack drawn into the fray.

Walker, however, made it through unscathed.

She is pragmatic about not quite edging out Mariana Pajón for gold on the day. "One thing I found interesting was that, as an athlete, the ultimate goal is to win an Olympic medal," she says. "After winning silver in

London, I realised it wasn't the medal that mattered to me, it was the feeling that came with it." Competing in the inaugural Olympic BMX event in Beijing whetted Walker's appetite for a medal, which in London was temporarily sated.

"My next goal is to recover from shoulder surgery and start the preparation for the 2016 Olympics in Rio," she says when asked what the future holds. "Of course I have to say I want to go one better and win gold in Rio but honestly, it is more important to me to spend the next three-and-a-half years turning over every stone to get faster and stronger and realise my potential." 🍌