

RAYMOND CHARLES SMITH, 1929 – 2010

My name is Tim Erickson and I am the secretary of the Victorian Race Walking Club. I have been a clubmate of Ray's since 1966 and I feel honoured today to say a few words about him.

Today I wish to talk both of his public life and his many achievements and of the private man whom I was privileged to know.

His achievements and accolades were many and included

- 1955 Australian 50km champion and Australian 50km record holder
- 1956 Olympian (6th in the 50km racewalk)
- IAAF racewalk judge (1977-1995)
- IAAF Race Walking Committee member (Oceania)
- Athletics Australia Life Member
- Athletics Victoria Life Member
- Coburg Harriers Life member
- Victorian Race Walking Club Life Member and past President and Treasurer
- Athletics Victoria 50 year Membership Award (2004)
- Athletics Victoria 50 Year Officiating Award (2004)
- Race Walking Australia 40 Year Merit Award (2009)
- Australian Sports Medal (2000).

As Ray's nephew Ken has alluded earlier, Ray's upbringing was tough. With his mother dying when he was only 4, he was brought up by relatives, experiencing as a child the aftermath of the Great Depression followed by the uncertainty and anguish of the Second World War. These various events influenced Ray greatly and no doubt moulded him in part into the fiercely independent, reserved and sometimes touchy person that we all knew. You had to scratch deeply below the surface to find the real Ray Smith buried underneath all the protective layers.

Ray came into athletics by chance. He and a group of friends from the Preston area had gone to a 1945 Christmas Carnival at the Coburg Lake and they got talking to a representative at the Coburg Harriers tent. The boys were invited to training that Sunday morning at the Coburg Football Ground. They duly went – but Ray was the only one of the boys who came back the following Sunday for more of the same.

As a young athlete, he tried all the events but it was in walking that he excelled. With an early win on the track, he was hooked and within a couple of years he was in the Victorian Junior team competing over 10,000m at Australian championship level. He was strongly built at 6'2" and 12 stone and had a perfect walking style. He could boast post-career that he had never been disqualified in his entire walking career.

He was first and foremost an athlete and a damn fine one. He was proud of his achievements and cherished his time as an elite walker. Yet he was loathe to talk about it in person – he preferred to let the press clippings and photographs tell the story. Many was the time I asked him for information for one of my articles and all I normally got in reply was a short extract from a newspaper or a short summary of the race results with a one line commentary. But persist I did and eventually I extracted much from him – his time with Percy at Portsea, his injuries post 1956 Olympics and his eventual decision to retire as a walker and to move into judging. Much of it I have written about previously, some of it he was willing to tell but loathe to see published. Such was his need for privacy – he gave out snippets on his life but there were areas that were not for public consumption.

His introduction to the great Percy Cerutti is worth relating. One of the more senior Coburg Harriers runners organised to take a group of young harriers down to Portsea for a weekend of training. The group caught the train to Frankston and then the bus from Frankston to Portsea, eventually being met about 11PM by Percy at the bus stop and led down the dirt track to his compound via the light of a kerosene lamp. Ray then became a regular at Portsea and was greatly influenced by Percy's ideas throughout his career, taking on his ideas of diet and hard work and personal sacrifice.

Ray's subsequent judging career saw him judge internationally at the highest levels, including Olympic and Commonwealth Games, World Cups and IAAF World Championships. His judging appointments saw him judge in Australia, China, England, Germany, the Isle of Man, Italy, Korea, New Zealand, Scotland, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, USA and the former USSR. His IAAF Judging career extended over an 18 year period from 1977 to 1995. Even after he retired from the IAAF panel, he continued to judge in Australia for a further 10 years.

As a judge he never let anyone get away with anything regardless of who it was. I had my fair share of run-ins with Ray in my years as a competitor and coach and it is fair to say that at times we were not on talking terms. In the days when the chief judge's red card counted as two, he was prepared to vote with his feet regardless of the repercussions and regardless of the individual concerned. He once said to me that a judge has to keep his distance from walkers if he is to do his job correctly. *You can't be everyone's friend and be a judge as well.* Words well spoken – walk judging is not a job for the faint hearted and Ray was a role model on how to do it fearlessly and honestly.

Former international walking representative Paul Van Kopplen summed up Ray's judging well when he wrote last week

Ray was a big influence, his report meant double to me. I knew if I got past him I would be safe anywhere in the world when I raced .

Even after he retired from the top judging ranks, he still kept a close interest in the world of Australian racewalk judging. As IAAF judge Bob Cruise wrote in an email to me last week:

Ray was my judging mentor. When I first started judging at Melbourne University he would often say "You're not judging Little Aths now. We want some walkers left". His counsel didn't end there. After a number of national championships he would invite me back to his hotel room where he would show me video he had taken during competition that day often questioning why I had or hadn't acted the way I did.

Ray was never one to shirk from saying what needed to be said or offering advice if he thought someone needed it. If he felt a race had been poorly judged, he said so to the judges. If he felt that an event was poorly organised, he said so to the organisers (I copped a few blasts myself over the years on minor points of race administration where he felt that improvement was needed). But he never openly criticised walkers – he had his own ideas on who was walking well and who was getting away with a few liberties but these thoughts remained private. He never played the man.

Andrew Jamieson's recent email backs this up

Ray was a bloke with strong opinions who gave it to you straight (particularly when your style wasn't too good) but he always had a twinkle in his eye. We'll all miss him at Albert Park.

Ray had to leave school at age 15 and had hoped for an apprenticeship. But it was 1945 and all the jobs on offer were going to WW2 returning soldiers so all he could find was a job as a bicycle courier for a Melbourne pharmacy. It was some time later that a Coburg Harriers committee member arranged for an interview with K. G. Luke, a local manufacturer of badges and medallions and an importer of fine silverware. Ray was interviewed personally by Sir Kenneth Luke, the then president of Carlton Football Club (as Ray remained a lifelong Collingwood supporter, I am not sure how he reconciled that one), got a job in the sales department and worked for the company for 34 years, from 1947 to 1980. He worked for many years as one of their sales representative, touring schools and taking orders for badges and medals.

Lukes was the firm that made the official 1956 Olympic medals and badges and they were especially proud to see one of their employees competing in the Olympic 50km walk.

Ray was a valuable resource for the Australian walking community over many years due to his work connections.

- With help from colleagues at Lukes, he designed our Racewalking Australia competition medal whose theme 'WALKING AROUND AUSTRALIA' was inspired by the reverse side of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games Commemorative Medallion depicting athletes in circular procession.
- He organized many of the VRWC end of season trophies for many years through the 70s. When he moved to Wiltshire in 1980, the prizes changed to Wiltshire fine cutlery and silverware, much of which is, I am sure, still in use in many Melbourne homes.
- Finally, in recent years, he passed on the last of his collection of silverware as perpetual trophies – a fine sterling silver platter and tea and coffee pots, which were commissioned as VRWC perpetual trophies – the Alf Robinson Trophy, the Mabel Robinson Trophy, the Ray Smith Trophy and the Elsie Jacobson Trophy are now presented annually.

He was a great collector of memorabilia and he always had an eye for history in his collecting. His vast array of 1956 Olympic photos, pins, badges, postcards, general memorabilia (automobile plates, parking signs, etc), team uniforms, etc, was documented and eventually put up on our website in a series of 1956 Olympic pages and was then either sold by Ray at auction or donated to the Australian National Museum in 2005. While he had held onto these items for some 50 years, he needed some ready cash to see out his final years and it was time to part with them all, even his framed Olympic diploma documenting his 6th place in the 50km event.

In 2006, on the 50th anniversary of the Melbourne Olympics, a special Olympic display was opened in the Australian National Museum in Canberra with the centre piece being Ray's racing uniform and tracksuit which the museum had bought at auction. Ray was flown to Canberra for the official opening and spent several days up there being interviewed and lapping up the limelight.

I had many any discussions with him over recent years on matters historical and I never ceased to be amazed at the newspaper articles or old photos that would be scanned and emailed to me to help me out. I don't know how he kept it all for so many years and over so many rental shifts but keep it he did.

When Ray eventually finished at K. G. Luke in 1980, he found employment with Wiltshire, a producer of fine silverware. Subsequent to this, he took up employment with one of the local Melbourne TAFE colleges and this marked his introduction to the world of computers. He took to it like a duck to water, passionately embracing the new world that was opened to him.

He became an Apple Computer advocate, always relishing the opportunity to tell anyone how easy it was to do this or that on the Apple compared to Windows. He bought his own computer, scanner and video camera and went to work. His vast memorabilia collection was scanned and reproduced in various formats, adding vastly to our archives and to our knowledge of Australian walking from the late 1940s onwards.

He loved his new toys and was always finding creative ways to use them.

For many years, he produced a two page photo intensive club broadsheet which was distributed free on race days. His broadsheet criteria were twofold:

1. Only ever show photos of good walking technique and
2. Always look for the quirky photo and, where possible, tie it in with an appropriate caption.

He took his video camera to every race and filmed extensively. He soon realised that people were keen to see this footage so he harangued us into buying a TV and a VCR player for the Walkers Club so that each week his latest video shoots would be on display for all to see. He was in his element sitting in the clubrooms the following week, explaining the intricacies of the walking technique and how each could improve his/her style. He knew everyone and he encouraged all and sundry in their walking. Nothing escaped his keen eye. A slight limp and he would be asking that walker after the race if he/she was injured. A lapse in technique and he would be there to advise and encourage the walker with strategies to improve.

Over the years, we saw these weekly videos grow in sophistication to include scrolling competitor lists, special sound effects, fades and background music. He was always learning and always after that special effect to catch the attention of the viewer.

I have copies of all his videos and broadsheets (it took quite some effort to get them all!) and they now form part of our ever growing VRWC archive of Australian racewalking. Ray was so pleased to see this and he felt in his later years that his vast collection could now be safely passed onto our club who would treasure them as he did. Over the last couple of years, he has given us what remained of his collection and it is safely documented, stored and available for use when the occasion arises.

And he loved email! Many were the people who received their daily or weekly email from 'vicwalker'. It could be anything - a joke, a race result, a newspaper clipping from the local paper, a link to an amusing website, a titbit from his vast sporting archives or a general observation on life. Indeed in email, you saw the real Ray Smith who was often safely hidden away in day to day encounters.

Being a former Australian 50km champion himself, he was always keen to support longer distance walking which he regarded as the ultimate expression of the sport. He had a special esteem for anyone who challenged themselves over the distances and he was disappointed that, in this modern day and age, fewer walkers were attempting the classic 50km event. His Ray Smith Trophy over 35km was a strategy to get walkers back into these longer distances.

Ray also sought to encourage our young walkers and many was the time when he produced a photo collage of a particular walker and passed it onto him or her. On one occasion he even produced one of me and my son Chris from a Victorian 5000m track championship of a few years ago. It showed Chris lapping me in a series of photos, taken off his video camera. When I suggested that the photos would be better placed in reverse order to show me passing Chris, he kindly obliged and that was the copy that I passed onto Chris. He did not know the effect that his work had on so many people. One of the mothers emailed me last week to say

It was with great sadness that we read of Ray's passing. He was a lovely man who was always giving of his time, wisdom and years of experience. He even photographed Rob running at Box Hill one day in a very close finish with another competitor and emailed it through to us. His presence around the tracks will be greatly missed.

Many are the people who have emailed or rung me over the last week to talk of Ray. To quote a few

WA based walker David Smythe

I along with everyone in racewalking have a fond memory of Ray Smith He congratulated me on my good walk at Albert Park. Then I told him thanks was a seasons best by 6 seconds and thats when he picked up I am a kiwi. Then he asked how long I had been in australia. When I said 6 years, he put his hand on my shoulder and said to me with the most serious face "David you have been here 6 years and you can't speak Australian yet" then he laughed . That was my fond memory of the great man himself. He will be missed by so many people . My prayers and thoughts go out to his family the VRWC and every racewalker who had the amazing chance to meet him.

Mark Wall

As you are well aware, I have known Ray for many years. He mentored me in Judging, where he was very encouraging and trusting and other things in life. I recall the trips over the years such as 1975 in Perth, including the few days after that National title, to Auckland at Easter 1979 and Eschborn later in the year. This also included the many other trips to places such as the 20 mile in Canberra, year in, year out. On a more personal note, there are other memories of social evenings in certain hotels in Richmond, including Graham Richmond's Pub. I can even recall the day I first met him, Wednesday December 16th 1973 at a midweek VAWC Handicap at Albert Park. He has never really been far from my thoughts since I moved away in 1990 due to his active 'electronic' contributions. For me it is another end of a chapter in my life but I know he will continue to live on in peoples hearts and memories.

Stu Cooper

've always respected Ray for his learning, his sense of justice and his cheeky humour, his love of the sport and his achievement in it, as well as what he gave back to it as a judge, official and archivist.

When we heard of Ray's passing, we wore black armbands at our next weekly VRWC races and had a short silence before the events started. Looking around, I could see a number of our young walkers being hugged by their parents and shedding tears. Ray might have been an old man but he was still a commanding presence whom everyone at the club knew and loved. He will be sadly missed.

To his sister Valerie and to his extended family we pass on our condolences – Ray will be long and lovingly remembered by us all.

Tim Erickson
Thursday 17 June 2010