

2009 - SOUTHERN AUSTRALIA SIZZLES IN RECORD TEMPERATURES

I wrote this article in late January 2009, after we had experienced multiple days of near record heat across Victoria. Little did I know at the time that just over a week later, Melbourne would experience even hotter weather, culminating in what became known as the Black Saturday bushfires which were Australia's all-time worst bushfire disasters.

But first, onto the article:

For those overseas of northern Australian walkers, the weather has been the main point of discussion in southern Australia states over the past week or so. Here is an article that was published on Wed Jan 28th January in the local Age newspaper:

Tom Saunders, Wednesday January 28, 2009 - 19:43 EDT

The heatwave scorching the southeast of the country is reaching unprecedented levels with temperatures soaring to nearly 50 degrees in some parts of South Australia.

Murray Bridge had the states high on Wednesday, reaching an unbearable 48 degrees, 19 above the mid summers average and their hottest day on record.

Other towns to climb above 45 included Keith, Kyancutta, Cleve, Naracoorte, Port Augusta, Snowtown, Wudinna and Ceduna. Even Encounter Bay on the southern coast hit 46, a remarkable 22 degrees above average.

Darkness is bringing little relief with overnight minimums hovering near 30 degrees, around 15 above average.

Unfortunately the heatwave is still only in its early stages with 40 degree temperatures set to continue over much of South Australia into the weekend.

Although that article focused on South Australia, Victoria has not been spared from the heat with our Melbourne temperatures peaking as follows in an all-time 3 day heatwave record

Wed 28/01/2009	43.5 (that's 110.3°F)
Thu 29/01/2009	44.3 (that's 111.7°F)
Fri 30/01/2009	45.1 (that's 113.2°F)

Of course, it was potentially even hotter inland with the 7 day forecast for Mildura (an inland Victorian city) on Wed 28/01 reading as follows:

43, 43, 43, 44, 46, 47, 50, 49

Needless to say, all sporting events, including the Athletics Victoria interclub, were postponed or cancelled.

This sent me to the old scrapbooks to find the hottest conditions I ever raced and it was an easy one to document as it was still clear in my mind. The date was Australia Day, **26 January 1981** and the occasion was a Victoria vs SA vs NSW vs Tasmania Track and Field Match at Olympic Park in Melbourne. The first event to be contested was the 3000m walk, the temperature was **42°C** and a very strong and hot northerly wind was blowing. I remember standing under a shower for 5 mins before the race started and then standing on the start line dripping wet. Within 2 laps, my racing uniform was dry. The race results showed

1.	Tim Erickson	VIC	12:18
2.	Michael Woods	NSW	12:30
3.	Bill Dyer	VIC	12:34

Actually, David Smith (VIC) was first to cross the finish line in an amazing time (considering the conditions) of 11:47 but he was subsequently disqualified.

The next event to get underway was a 2000m Junior Steeplechase and a number of the competitors collapsed in the heat. The organisers then announced that all longer events would be shortened – of course, we were all pretty vocal about how weak they all were, given that we had contended with the conditions and completed our 3000m walk!

The newspaper the next day documented the day and the month as follows

The hottest since 1908

The weather Bureau confirmed yesterday what most Victorians have suspected: this is one of the hottest Januarys in memory. Since New Year's Day, the State has had 11 days with temperatures above 35 degrees.

In this century, only 1908 had more 35-plus days – 12 of them – and 1981 has 4 days left in which to break the record. Yesterday afternoon's cool change dropped the temperature 15 degrees in half an hour from 40 at 5pm to 25 at 5.30pm. It brought relief from the heat – and destructive winds.

Trees and power lines came down in several suburbs, including Greensborough and Ivanhoe, and winds of 110 kmh were registered at Tullamarine and at Point Lonsdale.

The mighty 1908 heat wave was also around Australia Day (January 26th) and also saw continuous days of temperatures well in

excess of 100°F. Once again, just like in 1908 and 1981, the Australia Day week had seen extraordinary temperatures and intolerable conditions.

One final piece of Melbourne weather trivia – the highest temperature ever recorded in Melbourne was on the famous **Black Friday** (13th January 1939) when the temperature peaked at **114.1°F (45.6°C)** and hundreds of fires that had been burning spasmodically over a large part of the State gathered into a series of vast conflagrations that swept the forest areas, destroying millions of acres, destroying homes and small townships and killing 71 people. The fires were accompanied by record temperatures across Victoria and winds that reached velocities estimated at over 100 miles an hour. The other interesting fact about this infamous day is that the humidity in Melbourne was measured at an unbelievable 8%, meaning that the air was nearly completely devoid of moisture. Hopefully we will never see another 'Black Friday' in our lifetimes.

But at least it doesn't snow in Melbourne in the winter!

Well, now for the addendum.

A week later, it all happened again when on Saturday, 7th February 2009 (now known as **Black Saturday**), a series of bushfires ignited across the Australian state of Victoria. These fires are now recognized as Australia's all-time worst bushfire disaster and resulted in Australia's highest ever loss of life from a bushfire; 180 people dead 414 injured.

Melbourne hit **46.4 °C (115.5 °F)**, the hottest temperature ever recorded for the city, and humidity levels dropped to as low as two percent. The McArthur Forest Fire Danger Index reached unprecedented levels, ranging from 160 to over 200. This was higher than the fire weather conditions experienced on Black Friday in 1939 and Ash Wednesday in 1983. The overwhelming majority of fire activity occurred between the afternoon of 7 February and 7:00 pm, when wind speed and temperature were at their highest, and humidity at its lowest.

That temperature remains our highest Melbourne temperature to this day.

There are a few other major race days that were significantly effected by heat.

Victorian T&F Championships, Olympic Park, Melbourne, Saturday 7th February 2009

The first that springs to mind was Saturday 14th February 2004. I wrote heelandtoe-2004-num11

How hot is 40°C. Just ask our Open, Masters and Junior walkers who competed in the Victorian 5000m walks on Saturday 14 February at Olympic Park. When the men started their race at 1:30PM, the Jolimont clock was showing 40°C and when the women started at 2:10PM, it had risen to 42°C. By the time the women finished, it was showing 43°C. By coincidence, the South Australian 10,000m walk championship was also held on the same day in Adelaide and they also faced 43°C temperatures.

The placings in those Victorian track championships read pretty impressively for that sort of temperature

Men 5000m Walk

1.	Erickson, Christopher	ATHLETICS ESSENDON	23:08.15
2.	Beaton-Wells, Michael	OLD SCOTCH C	23:16.03
3.	Donahoo, Mark	ATHLETICS ESSENDON	23:19.50



The men's field gets underway in the famously hot Victorian T&F 5000m track walk

Women 5000m Walk

1. Wapshott, Kellie	KNOX SHERBROOKE AC	25:35.31
2. Sansonetti, Nicole	BOX HILL AC	26:36.47
3. Muldoon, Wendy	BOX HILL AC	27:14.81

Australian 20km Championships Meet, Hobart, Saturday 25th February 2012

The next one that comes to mind is the Australian 20km Championship meet in Hobart on Saturday 25th February 2012. Hobart is the most southerly of our capital cities and extreme heat is the last thing that anyone would expect there.

I reported on this in <http://www.vrwc.org.au/newsletters/heelandtoe-2012-num22.pdf>. The report started:

Fast forward to Hobart in February for the 20km trial, an event which we will all remember for many years. The forecast during the week had predicted a temperature of 35°C but on the day it was much worse, peaking at over 38°C and still sitting at that temperature at the 6PM start time. The sun was still high in the sky and most of the race was walked with no respite whatsoever until around 7:15PM that the evening shade finally provided some relief - but the damage was well and truly done by then with an attrition rate of around 50%.

For the record, Jared Tallent won the men's 20km in 1:23:01, with Chris Erickson walking perhaps his best ever race to finish second with 1:24:12, just over 1 minute behind him.

20km Men

1. Tallent, Jared	AIS/VIC	1:23:01
2. Erickson, Christopher	AIS/VIC	1:24:12
3. Gomez, Inaki	CAN	1:24:46

20km Women

1. Tallent, Claire	AIS/SA	1:32:58
2. Lamble, Regan	AIS/VIC	1:36:52
3. Schindlerova, Zuzana	CZH	1:37:34



*Left: Preparing for the super hot race – Zuzie Schindlerova, Chris Erickson and AIS Chief Walks Coach Brent Vallance
Right: The start of the 20km championships at 6PM*

Amazingly, that day's Hobart temperature of 38.1°C was bettered less than 12 months later, with a scorching highest ever **41.8°C** recorded on 4th January 2013. Luckily, we were not racing our Australian 20km championships that weekend.

Yes, it might not snow in our major cities but it does get bloody hot!

Tim Erickson
5 August 2018