

KEN WALTERS (C 26), JACK OF ALL SPORTS AND MASTER OF MANY

Ken Walters, born 19 September 1932, turns 78 this year but you would never know it. He cheerful outlook and positive energy belie his age and he is still involved at the Eastwood Golf Bowls Club, still coaches in the sport of racewalking, still commentates at the Victorian Masters championships, still helps put out the monthly “Around The Grounds” magazine and is still venue co-manager for the Victorian Masters Croydon venue.

His first love was professional cycling which he took up as a 15 year old in 1947. He then competed with distinction until 1962, racing in Australia's most famous professional tour, the Sun Tour, on a number of occasions and actually winning his division of the 1955 Sun Tour and winning several sprints.



Ken leads the peleton in one of the many professional races in which he competed

It was not an easy ride by any means as he worked two jobs, toiling early morning as a milkman and then plying his trade as a baker during the day, before getting on the bike in the evening to fit in whatever training he could in what remained of the day

The great photo shown below, published in the Melbourne Herald Sun, was taken during the 1954 Sun Tour and was captioned 'Alone at the Top'. It shows Ken changing his tyre at the top of Mt Hotham. The support cars had been stopped by a snow drift lower down the mountain and Ken was on his own when he punctured. The really amazing thing is the road surface – not the bitumen we take for granted nowadays – it was shale and loose rock. It is tough enough riding up a mountain over such terrain but imagine going down the other side at speed. They certainly bred them tough in those days.



Ken eventually gave the bikes away in 1962 – he was 30 years of age, had been riding for some 15 years and was newly married with new responsibilities - now some considerable years down the track, he and Judy are still together and the proud parents of four and grandparents of seven.

Although Ken had given up cycling, he was not ready to forgo his sporting endeavours and immediately moved onto squash. A year later, as captain of the Ringwood team, he helped them to their first squash pennant.

Within a couple more years, in 1965, he was extending himself even further and 'bluffed my way' into a career as a boundary umpire with the Victorian Football League (VFL). After officiating in two grand finals, he was encouraged to step up to field umpiring and he continued in this role each winter until only 3 years ago when he was forced to retire with *planta fasciatis*. That adds up to 41 years – not a bad effort in anyone's books!

As his family grew, Ken and Judy started them in Little Athletics as members of the Sherbrooke Little Athletics Club. As the club grew to 90 members, Ken realised that, rather than compete at the Knox Little Athletics Centre, there was scope to expand to a new centre. After socialising the idea with all the local primary schools in the Sherbrooke area, he founded the Sherbrooke Little Centre which opened in 1970 with him as the inaugural Secretary. In the first season, the centre boasted 450 participants. As an aside, both Ken and Judy have been honoured with life memberships of Sherbrooke Little Athletics Club.

Ken realised that no one at the new centre knew anything about racewalking and that they lacked any qualified walk judges so, in 1971, he attended an inspiring seminar in Marysville given by racewalking coach Frank McGuire. This marked Ken's introduction to walking and he subsequently took on the role of racewalking coach with the Sherbrooke Little Athletics Club.

The club trained at an old grass track in Sherbrooke and Ken soon realised that it was not really good enough for walking so he took his training group down to the synthetic track at Ringwood. While there, he was approached by local identity Charlie Gorman who asked whether he was willing to expand his training group to take on some Ringwood kids. Ken of course agreed and he soon had a 40 strong training group.

With such a large group of walkers now training in Ringwood, he realised that there was a need to provide something further in the local area and in 1979 he founded Proclamation Park Walkers Club. When interviewing him for this article, he reminisced that in the early days before the Ringwood track had lights, the walk judges had to use torches to judge the walkers when evening events were scheduled!

This new club gave him the opportunity to take older walkers under his wing and it was in this context that he coached Paul Copeland to win the Australian Under 18 trackwalk title in 1983. This was the start of an exciting time in Ken's coaching career as he helped Paul develop into one of our best ever walkers with an international career that stretched from 1986 to 1997.

Ken was also heavily involved in the Victorian Veteran's Association at this time, both on the track and on the road. In the 1980's he founded the "Bushrangers Classic" 100km team relay run in which teams of 5 runners each ran four 5km legs around the Dandenong Ranges east of Melbourne. In the very first year of this event, 26 teams competed. Judy and Ken used to map out the course each year and they kept running up for 8 years until eventually the increasing traffic spelt the end of what had been a very successful concept.

He was one of the key organisers of the World Veteran Games in Melbourne in 1987 and introduced individualised lapscore for all the longer walk and run events. This is still used today in Australian Masters events and has stood the test of time as the best way to run these events.

Ken was never one to forgo a challenge. When holidaying one year in central Victoria, he saw an advertisement for the "4 Peaks" alpine run which challenges the Porepunkah, Hotham, Feathertop and Buffalo mountains. He entered and finished the gruelling run and then completed it 7 more times in subsequent years.

In the early 1990's, he joined the Professional Runners Cross Country club and to take on yet another challenge. Over the course of his first season with the club, he improved his 10km time by 7m 30s and won 20th anniversary staging of the Murchison 10km Handicap event.

With the interest generated by the Sydney to Melbourne Westfield runs, this was a golden period for ultra distance running in Australia and, with his new found running fitness, he decided to test himself over the longer distances. He fronted for the annual Victorian 50 Mile championship and in his first year he won the novice section at Princes Park with a very impressive 7h 01m. The next year, he was included in the elite section at the Box Hill track and improved his time to 6h 48m.

His introduction to centurion walking was an accident. While at a walkers club event at Albert Park, he saw a poster advertising the annual 100 mile walk to be held at the Collingwood Harriers Track in Clifton Hill in October 1994 and he expressed an interest. Someone told him that he had no hope and so a \$10 bet was laid and he was committed.

The annual 100 mile walk was a small affair in those days and Ken was one of only 7 walkers who toed the line for the Saturday 1PM start. I remember the weekend well as Melbourne turned on its usual fickle weather. The race started in cool windy conditions which soon turned to rain which then fell intermittently over the afternoon. As night fell and the wind continued unabated, the temperature plummeted and competitors were forced to put on layers of clothing to protect themselves from the bitter conditions. It was not until the early hours of the morning that the wind dropped and we were greeted with a much improved Sunday. At least those remaining had good conditions and even some sunshine for the final morning of the event.

Of the four remaining on the track, all finished the event and the first three reached the elusive 100 mile mark, thus becoming centurions. The first two placings were taken by Queenslanders. Peter Bennett walked an amazing race, never showing any real distress and finishing strongly in an outstanding time of 19:42:54. By way of contrast, Andrew Ludwig had to survive a very torrid second half in which leg problems nearly spelt failure. To his credit he never contemplated pulling out or giving up and he struggled home with a 100 mile time of 22:26:09.

The third walker to complete the hundred was Ken. He had his race well planned and all went according to the script for the first 12 hours. He set off at 3:00 min laps and had a 30 min break at the 5 hour mark. Then back on the track and onto the 50 mile mark in 10:31:40. Another major break of 45 mins and he was off again for the second half. However, it was soon apparent that Ken was quietly suffering and he withdrew into himself as he battled the body in an effort to keep going. Opinion was that he was gone at about 60 miles and would not last much longer. But as the night ended, Ken was still to be seen on the track and looking more in control. A short break at the 20 hour mark and he stormed home with 3 min laps over the last 100 laps. He knew Andrew Ludwig was within striking distance and he got to within one lap as the two reached the 99 mile mark. In what was perhaps the closest finish in any of our 100 milers, Ken finished about 300m behind Andrew to take third place in the fine time of 22:28:31. However, the effort was apparent as he was helped back to his support tent. Like Andrew's performance, it had been a battle of mind and body as the mind had been forced to override the normal limits of endurance.

The fourth walker still on the track when the final gun fired was Carmela Carassi, a complete newcomer to such a demanding discipline. Her final distance of 92 miles 992 yards was the greatest distance walked by any Australian woman and she returned the next year to successfully complete her hundred and become a centurion.

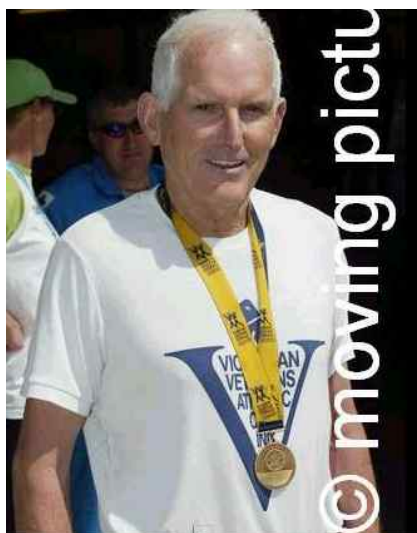


The 4 finishers – Peter Bennett, Carmela Carrassi, Ken and Andrew Ludwig

Around this time, Ken and Judy took on a new challenge – running the Ferny Creek cafe in the Dandenongs. A regular post-run breakfast spot for the running fraternity, the venue was always packed on a Sunday morning and, for the next four years, they were kept busy by the demands of running a successful small business.

As mentioned above, Ken has been involved in the Veterans athletics movement since the early 1980s and he competed in a number of World Veterans and World Masters Games, winning medals on numerous occasions. .

1983 World Veterans Championships, New Zealand	Competed in Marathon (M50)
1987 World Masters Games in Melbourne	20km walk 2 nd , 5000m walk 3 rd , Teams gold (M55)
1989 Oceania Masters Games in Norfolk	10km walk 1 st (M55)
1999 World Veterans Games, Gatehead	20km walk, 5 th (M65)
2001 World Veterans Games, Brisbane	20k walk 4 th , Teams gold (M65)
2002 World Masters Games, Melbourne	5000m walk 2 nd , 20km walk 1 st (M70)



Ken at the World Masters Games in Melbourne in 2002 after winning the M70 20km walk

Ken is still coaching racewalkers some 40 years after attending that eventful seminar. Amongst his current protégées are Rhydian Cowley who has just been selected to represent Australia in the 2010 World Racewalking Cup and the 2010 World Junior Championships and Kylie Irshad, the current Victorian Open 5000m racewalk champion. He is justifiably regarded on the local front as one of our most knowledgeable and successful coaches.

And of course, Ken was on hand with his old mate Les Clarke at our centurions walk last month, looking after Queenslanders Peter Bennett and Ian Valentine. And of course he stayed up all night!



Ken hands some refreshments to Peter Bennett in this year's 100 mile walk at Coburg last month