"From Gumboots to Glory"

It was the iconic year of 1983 when Cliff Albert Young stormed home to win the first Westfield Sydney to Melbourne Ultra Marathon. At 61, the untrained eye, mass media and unsuspecting public did not expect this "Boy from down Beech Forest way" to win and upstage the trained younger athletes but he did. Australia was certainly awakened to the sport of ultrarunning. A closer look at the form guide would have revealed that he certainly had some form on the board and certainly had the breeding to be a champion ultrarunner.

It wasn't just Cliff's latent athletic ability that endeared him to the Australian public, it was the time he had for everyone and the wave to all of his adoring fans. Nothing ever fazed Cliff. I was fortunate to have been able to compete against him at Coburg on numerous occasions and corresponded with him several times whilst I was writing the "Westfield Book". He always sat down and responded to me which was greatly appreciated.

Cliff's father and grandfather were amongst the early bush settlers who settled in the Beech Forest area of Victoria in the late 1800's after moving from Geelong. The family soon discovered that the area was fantastic for growing potatoes but there was never huge money in farming and like most pioneer families, they struggled for a number of years.

Cliff was born on 8th February 1922 and spent his first few years living in an old bark hut with his family. They struggled during his early years and also during the Depression. His father had to take work wherever he could and manage the farm at weekends. Despite the harshness, the Young family survived and Cliff was bush hardened from an early age.

Cliff was in his 30's when he decided to try his luck in Queensland during the winter cutting sugar cane in the fields of Childers. This became an annual pilgrimage for quite a few years along with a season of work in New Zealand. It is an interesting but little known fact that New Zealand is where Cliff first tasted the joys of the "long run". It was several years later when he returned, competing with great results in the Veterans Games.

Cliff also ran in some mile races as a professional when still in his 30's with his most impressive performance being third place in the 1955 Goldfield Mile at Bendigo. To quote Cliff, "I wasn't much chop, I was like a Melbourne Cup horse, I needed it longer".

Cliff's first fun run was the 1979 Adidas Sun Superun. The 16 kilometre course crossed the Westgate Bridge and was amongst the first events in Australia to capture the start of the fun run boom. He ran a very respectable 64 minutes and was even interviewed by the Melbourne media. The story was never printed though and Cliff felt that many people didn't believe he could run such a time.

The "Big M" Melbourne Marathon followed producing a time of 3h21m, then shortly after, a marathon in Geelong in slightly over three hours. It was on that day that he first raced against John Craven, an athletics reporter with the old Melbourne evening newspaper, The Herald. John reported on that encounter and Cliffy's fame started to spread.

Cliff produced another three hour performance in the Melbourne Marathon the following year and finished forty third. The TV Commentator doubted Cliff's ability, thinking that he must have come in from a side street before finishing!

Cliff progressed into ultras and ran a couple of the 50 mile races at the Melbourne University track. In his second attempt, he ran an excellent time of 6hrs 37m, finishing second behind Keith Swift from New South Wales.

This excellent result wetted Cliff's appetite for more distance and he was soon heading to Manly to compete in the 100 mile event. There were twenty starters and only two finishers. Cliff won in an excellent time of 14hrs 47min. Second that day was eccentric Englishman, Joe Record two hours behind. Cliff and Joe became good friends.

With his thirst for distance taking a quantum leap. Cliff decided to have a crack at Siggy Bauer's 1,000 mile world record. The local council threw their weight behind it and a course was set up around Memorial Square in his home town of Colac. (This was the precursor for the Australian Six Day Race that has been running for over twenty years). Cliff fell short of his goal but still completed over 500 miles in the allocated time. He had some injury concerns along with a crew that were very much learning about dietary requirements for endurance athletes.!

This didn't put a damper in Cliff's enthusiasm. A month later, he first heard about John Toleman putting up the $10,000 winner take all prizemoney for a race between Sydney and Melbourne. Toleman did this to try to give his friend, George Perdon, some recognition for all the endurance records he had set over the years. Cliff was accepted into the race and started

training with a vengeance. His good friend, Mike Tonkin, started to arrange sponsorship.

A lot has been written over the years about Cliff's performance in the 1983 Westfield Run. He arrived at the start with the feeling that the other runners were looking at him with disdain. He knew he had something to prove. It was on the first night that Cliff and his crew accidentally rewrote the rule book about multi-day ultra running. They pulled off the road for a six hour break. Cliff was awakened only a short time later, thought to himself that it was a quick sleep, then headed for the road. It was still dark and it only took Cliff and his crew a short time to realize that he had only slept for two hours! Regardless, Cliff felt good and the consequences were written into Australian athletic history.

By the time Cliff got to Kalkallo just out of Melbourne, all of Australia knew about Cliff Young and thousands met him to cheer him onto the finish line in Melbourne some 30 miles away. By that time, Cliff was running on memory and was swept up with the public support for the rest of the journey.

Cliff's reception, guiding him into Melbourne, was nothing compared with what awaited him at the Bourke St Mall. It was the early hours of the morning when Cliff completed the journey and wrote his name into history. Finishing in a time of 5D:15h:4m, he had beaten Toleman's champion, George Perdon, by nine hours.

Cliff's life became rather hectic and busy after the 1983 Westfield Run. He became the public promotional figure for Westfield for a number of years and married Mary Howells, a fun runner from Geelong who was involved with health supplements.

Cliff ran the Westfield Run five more times in the coming years. His record stands at three withdrawals and three finishes, excellent by any standards. Cliff often had a habit of retiring after each "bad" Westfield. None was more poignant than in 1989 when he withdrew with the lights of Bombala in the distance and Cliff saying "Thanks everyone. I've done my best".

Ninety percent of the Australian public never saw the solid ultra competitor away from the Westfield arena. It was 1985 when Cliff competed in the Australian 24 Hour Championships in Adelaide, breaking the Australian 24 hour all-comers record with an incredible 235.969km. Second placed Geoff Kirkman, pushed Cliff over the last few laps whilst Westfield Event Manager, Charlie Lynn. finished third in his first 24 Hour race. Cliff only held the record for three months, but this performance by a 63 year old must be seen as one of the best ultra performances in this country today.

Cliff, between 1981 and 1999 competed in over 70 ultra races around Australia from 50 Kilometres to multi-days (Westfield). At one time or another, he held several Australian and World age group records for various distances.

Some of Cliff's age group records during his career included the following:

100km Track	Adelaide.SA	71	14HR:08:54	17/10/1993	Aus.Rec	70-74
200km Track	Colac,Vic	73	1D:18:11:47	21/11/1995	Aus.Rec	70-74
500km Track	Colac,Vic	73	6D:00:00:00	21/11/1995	Aus.Rec	70-74
100 Mile Track	Colac,Vic	73	1D:06:49:10	21/11/1995	Aus.Rec	70-74
12 Hours Track	Sydney,NSW	60	129.525km	4/06/1905	Aus.Rec	60-64
12 Hours Track	Olympic Pk.Vic	68	104.800km	5/08/1990	Aus.Rec	65-69
48 Hours	Colac,Vic	73	233.435km	20/11/1995	Aus.Rec	70-74
Six Days	Colac,Vic	73	653.600km	20/11/1995	Aus Rec	70-74

One of my fondest memories of Cliff was at the 1999 Coburg 24 Hour Carnival when he completed 147km. A storm came through in the evening which sent most of the competitors scurrying for cover but not the 77 year old Cliff. He was leaning forward and kept going through the wind, rain and sleet. I finished about 30 kilometres behind Cliff, but he inspired me to keep going through the bad weather when I could have taken the easy option and headed for the tent.

Cliff spent his twilight years being cared for by the Powers family in Queensland. They were determined that Cliff be looked after in the best way possible and their devotion to him is highly commendable. Cliff passed away in November 2003. The outpouring of grief around Australia and overseas was testament to the regard in which he was held by his peers and anyone that was fortunate to have come in contact with him. The main funeral service was held in Queensland but there was also a Memorial Service in Colac which was packed with friends from the local area along with ultra runners from all over Australia.

Since then, the Colac Six Day Committee has renamed their event the "Cliff Young Australian Six-Day Race" to preserve

his memory. A web site has been set up by the author to piece together and remember Cliff's great career. His contribution to the sport in the latter part of the twentieth century is beyond question. As the latest inductee to the AURA Hall of Fame, he is a worthwhile member.

Tony Rafferty remembers Cliff for "His open hand and kindness of heart, his laconic humour which produced many moments of joy and laughter – and his immense capacity for endurance on the road and track….Cliff was, is, will always be, a folk hero"

A POEM ABOUT CLIFF

At a place called Parramatta to the south of Sydney town
Endurance runners gathered, some of world renown
A mighty crowd was there that day, the press and TV too
and many words were spoken before the day was through

Eleven runners toed the line, eleven hearts beat strong
For we all knew what lay ahead and where we could go wrong.
A gun was fired, away we went, each runner to his pace
The back-up crews were on the move, their runners for the race.

The road was thick with traffic, they were there in all their makes
And above the toots and cheering came the squeal of hard pressed brakes.
Through the shouts, the yells and bedlam, the police all acted fine
But all the way to Melbourne our lives were on the line.

The pace was hot through Goulburn, then it was on to Yass
Some runners' feet were blistered and others had the rash
But still we kept on moving, for we could only try
To run one hundred miles a day when we would rather die.

Our back-up crews did all they could, to keep us running strong
And they all suffered with us, when the day was hard and long.
With Gundagai behind us, there was Holbrook way ahead
How could we keep on running, when we were almost dead?

There were hills all shapes and sizes, some short, some long and steep
And each man had to beat them or fall into a heap.
We ran all day and half the night, to Albury and Wodonga
Though cheering crowds sure eased the pain, we could not stay there longer.

We had to keep on running, through the heat, the wind and rain
When the day was long and weary and the night was filled with pain.
When we passed through Wangaratta, Benalla was a cinch
Though our legs were tired and weary, we made it inch by inch.

Then came the Kelly country, and when we hit Euroa
Some of us were almost gone, but the race was still a goer.
Then onward, ever onward, through a day of wind and rain
We stopped at Violet Town a while, then it was on again.

It wasn't far past Seymour, when the rain came pelting down.
The wind was blowing strongly, and our faces were one big frown.
But still we kept on running, up a road that seemed like sand
And we would keep on running, while we had the strength to stand.

The people got behind us, in a way we knew they would
It was good to hear them cheering, in the rain without a hood.
Though they were drenched, they cheered us, with emotion running high

And those teardrops rolling down their cheeks, were also in our eyes.

They were there in countless numbers, the women, men and kids
And on this page we thank them all, to them we dip our lids.
The crowds were huge through Melbourne, the cheering loud and strong
And still we kept on running, though we'd nearly had the gong.

And as we breathed the poison fumes, from cars of every make
Oh God, is there a limit to what flesh and blood can take?
Up hills, round bends, up hills once more, Oh God where will it end?
Our heads were spinning badly, and we can't pick foe from friend.

At last the race has ended, with its noise and cheers
Now is the time to put things straight, and wipe away the tears.
We know the race to Melbourne, was worth it every stride
It has given us renewed hope, and filled us up with pride.

We know full well our point was proved, although we may be nuts
And though we may be short on brains, we made top marks in guts.

References:

"Cliffy's book" by Cliff Young
AURA Cliff Young Ultramag supplement
AURA Ultramag December 2003 pg 3-16
"Cliff Young - Champion" Endurance Runner Supplement
The Ballad of Cliff Young by Al Simmons
Cliff Young's webpage maintained by the author

Compiled by ultra historian Phil Essam, August 2006