

## GWEN STEED

This article was written by VRWC member Heather Carr and was published initially in the Victorian Masters Assn newsletter Footprints. Thank you Heather for allowing me to add it to our VRWC archives...Tim Erickson...August 2014

Gwen Steed, a racewalker of renown and repute, epitomises everything that Masters Athletics stand for. Recently turned 70, Gwen lives in Seaford, has been married to Stuart for 44 years and has two adult children, John and Jenny, and is a beloved grandmother of three, Austin, Tyler and Millie.

Gwen was a relative late starter in the sport of racewalking. During the first 50 years of her life, she held little interest in athletics, and her awareness of racewalking was minimal. Her first taste of walking began when encouraged by her neighbour, Wendy Seers, to walk with her at Frankston Veterans Athletic club. Gwen enjoyed this activity, and thus began her life long involvement with racewalking.

When Gwen started attending Frankston venue in February 1994, she met Grace Smith who supported and inspired Gwen. Gwen showed an affinity for walking, revealing a natural ability, proving a quick learner and thus began the great love affair with racing!! Following her surge of interest in racewalking at Frankston, Gwen also began attending Mentone venue in December 1994 and with encouragement from fellow athletes to compete, Gwen persevered, and in no time became very proficient at racewalking.

Gwen began racewalking competitively in February 1994, when she was 51, and has been an active, passionate, committed and competitive member since then.

From 1994 to today, a total of 19 years, Gwen has been immersed in her passion for the sport. Gwen continued regularly attending Frankston and Mentone. Gwen started at Glen Eira in August 1995. In those early days Gwen met up with Glenys McPherson, Maureen Seedsman, Penny Hall, Joan Clarke, Lee Pownall and others of a strong and competitive standard who regularly competed at Championships. Marge Colthup, a long time athlete and excellent racewalker, showed interest in Gwen's rising achievements, recommended that Gwen train on Betty Newman's programme a year before Gwen competed in her first Victorian Championships. Betty Newman was an influential mentor for females as long ago as 1957, and remained a very strong influence in the field of racewalking, competing herself as well as having a large contingent of devotees. Going onto a specific training schedule helped improve Gwen's times considerably, so much so, that she caught the eye of renowned sprint and hurdles coach, Frank Kealy. However, after a few months, Gwen discovered that her body could not cope with the rigours of Betty's programme and decided to be coached principally by Frank. With this decision taken, Gwen demonstrated potential and promise under Franks's tutelage.

Gwen was persuaded to compete in 1997 in her 1st Victorian Championships. Her times for the 1500m of 8.14 - Gold - and the 5000m 29.38 - Gold - were of an exceptionally high standard. In Gwen's words, "I was very nervous and excited to compete in my first Vic Champs at Glen Eira in 1997. Watching on the sidelines were family and friends. To my amazement I won gold in the 5k and 1500m in the 50 year age group."

Shortly after the Victorian Championships, Gwen competed in her first Australian National Championships, Easter 1977. In this carnival, Gwen, in a time of 28:58 won Gold, a considerable improvement from the Victorian Championships, and took home silver in her first 10km in a time of 59:59. Gwen was so new to this distance, she believed she had an extra lap to walk!!

Several obstacles have been stoically overcome with dedication to improving style. During the 5000m racewalk in the World Championships in Newcastle, 1999, Gwen was disqualified through 'lifting'. To alter her style for a more legal and legitimate style required a lot of hard work. Here Frank devised a method of walking with weights, to help Gwen lower her shoulders, to assist in keeping her feet 'on the ground'. Gwen recognised her shortcomings and focused to resolve these issues, asking friends and fellow competitors to drop her arms during races. Gwen firmly believes that style can be changed through perseverance and hard work. Whilst Gwen was coached by Frank Kealy, he brought Gwen to a level that

was highly legal and therefore competitive, thus improving her self confidence, self esteem and ultimately ability. After Frank's passing in 2009, Gwen looked to Mark Donahoo for guidance and advice on training for 2 years. Gwen is still highly successful when competing at all levels of racewalking.

At times Gwen has been plagued with injury, but despite many setbacks exhibits astounding determination to overcome these liabilities and perseveres when faced with physical problems. Over the years Gwen has endured a fractured foot, a broken finger and a sprained ankle. Perhaps the most difficult time was before the World Games in Riccioni, Italy when she broke down and was unable to compete. Gwen was diagnosed with Graves disease, a thyroid condition, only 2 weeks before competition, and was advised by her specialist not to race. This was devastating for Gwen, as she had just entered the 65 year age group and was recording some of her best times. But despite this setback, and to demonstrate her 'metal', she still ended up travelling to Italy and supporting her friends and fellow competitors. This must have been an agonizing time for Gwen, but despite the heartbreak, she was still 'there' for her fellow countrywomen!

Gwen also works assiduously in the background for her home venue of Mentone. - setting up the weekly venue for competition, arranging the chairs, preparing for the evening supper, filling the urn, putting out the cups etc., but never looking for rewards in return. Another thing Gwen demonstrates is that she cares for her fellow competitors, showing care and compassion before, during and after competition. A quality that is not regularly demonstrated.

A very, very loyal member of the Victorian Race Walkers Club since April 1997, Gwen has recently won the 2012 Winter Masters Handicap Award, a highly competitive contest with many, many worthy opponents. Gwen attends VRWC regularly, and is a popular and exemplary member of the club.

Gwen has competed in many, many competitions, highlights including:

1. **Club** including a stint at Frankston, Glen Eira, but mainly Mentone, where a group of stalwarts are still active, competing on Wednesday nights and training on the weekends.

Mentone has a devoted group of racewalkers, which does help raise the bar for competitive racewalkers of Gwen's ilk. At the Mentone venue, Gwen currently holds W70 3000m, 2000m and 1500m walk records. I am convinced Gwen will break other club records as time goes along.

Interclub, organised by Athletics Victoria for the South East Region, held on Saturday afternoons during the summer, also appealed to Gwen, and she has been a staunch competitor for Victorian Masters at Interclub since November 1996. Gwen's first record was achieved at Interclub when she set an Australian and Victorian record for W55 of 16:34 for 3000m in February 1998. Her second record was set at the Victorian Race Walkers Club; again an Australian and Victorian record for W55 of 57:59 for 10km in July 1998. The third record was established at Interclub in a 1500m race, with a time of 7:56 when Gwen was 57 in January 1999. These records held strong significance for Gwen. "I realised I had to train more to get faster times so when I got the 3k Aust/Vic records and 10k Aust/Vic records I realised the hard training was well worth it."

2. **State** Very competitive, winning events over the years, from 1500m, 5000m ,and 10000 meters. Gwen has competed in all State titles except for 1998 and 2012.

3. **National** Again very competitive, holding National records for her events of 1500, 5000, & 10000. Gwen's first National competition was Easter 1997 at Melbourne's Olympic Park, where she raced brilliantly. In 1998, Gwen broke the W 55 Australian record held by Penny Hall in a time of 57:59

4. **Oceania** Gwen has competed successfully in several Oceania Games, those being Geelong, Cook Islands, Christchurch and Townsville.

5. **World** Gwen has competed in several World Championships; her first taste of 'Worlds' being in Newcastle, UK in 1999. An upset DQ in the 5000mw was quickly overcome showing Gwen's determination and resilience to the vagaries of racewalking; that is, style and judging. Gwen fronted up for the 10,000m, and then with typical determination finished 4th in the 10km. In 2001 when the World Championships were conducted in Brisbane, Gwen finished 2nd in the 5000m, and 3rd in the 10,000m, and also contributed to a silver 10,000m teams medal. Gwen was walking outstanding times prior to the

Brisbane Games, but one week before the Games, broke down at Walkers Club with a hamstring injury. To show her grit and toughness, Gwen persisted, enduring constant pain, still to finish in the top three. An amazing effort. In 2007 Gwen travelled to Italy, a very disappointed and frustrated athlete, being instructed by her specialist not to compete. However this setback did not deter Gwen, who has gone from strength to strength.

**6. Competing at the MCG** in the overage section prior to the XV111 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne in March 2006. A highly memorable occasion for Gwen.

Gwen has always recorded significantly high age graded performances, regularly in the high 80's - a fact of which she is very delighted and proud of. Gwen's best times are as follows:

1500m	7:49	W55
2000m	10:40	W55
3000m	16:07	W58
4000m	22:08	W57
5000m	27:22	W57
8000m	46:57	W56
10000m	57:59	W56

Gwen's training involves

Tuesdays - speed work

Wednesdays - Club race

Saturdays - VRWC or Interclub

Sunday - Long Distance 10km every Sunday

Has Monday, Thursday and Friday free.

Gwen's longest distance in competition is 10km. Although 20km is also a distance that Gwen could compete in, she never will, as there is always potential for injury.

Gwen's belief in Masters underlines her commitment to racewalking, and with the extra wonderful benefits such as keeping fit, the camaraderie and friendships developed is hugely important, and therefore reward enough for Gwen to reinforce the importance she holds for Masters Athletics. "When I joined Masters Athletics, Victorian Race Walkers Club and Athletics Victoria for Interclub competition, I came in touch with so many wonderful people who became close friends with me and are still involved in my life regularly today. I am immensely grateful I had the opportunity to join Masters Athletics and take up racewalking." A fitting comment from an amazing Master Athlete.