

JOHN SMITH

John Smith, who was born in England on 7th October 1938, was, in his day, one of NSW's best known racewalkers. Over a long career from the mid seventies to the early nineties, he won a swag of State titles and even represented Australia internationally, at the 1979 Lugano Cup.

John was a top runner in England in his younger days, winning the English One Mile Junior championship in 1955 in 4min 15sec and consistently running under 4min for the 1500m.

His first foray into racewalking in 1964 was not what one could describe as a normal progression. For a number of years, the annual British Centurions 100 mile walk qualifier had been held on a course from Leicester to Skegness and his home town, Peterborough, was at the half way mark. Never having walked seriously before, his plan was to drop out at the 50 mile mark when the race reached Peterborough. With no real experience in such events, he walked in street shoes, ordinary shorts and a short sleeved shirt. As it turned out, he passed through Peterborough still feeling good and continued on for the full 100 mile distance to record an excellent 100 mile time of 21:33:19 and to become Centurion number 359.

This whetted his appetite for the sport of racewalking and, by the time he migrated to Australia in the mid 1970's, he was an experienced and tough competitor. He was 2nd to Robin Whyte in the 1977 NSW 30km and 50km titles and was selected in the NSW team for the 1977 Australian 50km title in Adelaide. For him, this was a bad race and he finished well behind his NSW team mates. After receiving some good hearted stirring, he swore it would be the last time anyone in NSW would beat him.

True to his word, John won the 1978 NSW 10km track title and the 20km, 30km and 50km roadwalk titles and, for the next few years, was amongst our top walkers nationally. Age did not seem any sort of barrier to him and, at over 40 years of age, he still regularly broke 45 mins for the 10km distance.

John walked the Canberra 20 Mile event 11 times between 1976 and 1992 with a best time of 2:37:34, set in 1980 when he finished 3rd.

His finest walking moment was in 1979 when he represented Australia in the Lugano Cup in Eschborn, Germany. This deserves some discussion.

In the period leading up to this 1979 event, the Amateur Athletic Union of Australia had responded to calls from the AAU Walking Committee and others and had announced that it would send an Australian team of up to 12 walkers (4 in each of the men's 20km, the men's 50km and the women's 5km - this was the first official internationally sanctioned women's walking event ever held).

The Australian selectors' stated policy was that the first 3 place-getters in each trial would be automatic selections and the fourth spot would be at their discretion. The weekend of 15-16 July was chosen as the trial weekend and Victoria was asked to run the events. VAWC chose Fisherman's Bend as the venue and, with the 20 km event to be contested on the Saturday and the 50 km and 5 km to be contested on the Sunday, all was in place for a big weekend of racing.

The cream of Australia's walking community gathered in Melbourne for a unique opportunity. Up till then, the only international walking opportunities had been the Olympic and Commonwealth Games.

John finished second in the 20km trial, only 4 seconds behind winner Peter Fullager of South Australia, and both of them, along with NSW walker Rod Huxley gained automatic selection for the Lugano Cup 20km team.

1.	Peter Fullager	SA	1:33:42
2.	John Smith	NSW	1:33:46
3.	Rod Huxley	NSW	1:34:49

John then rushed home, packed his bags and headed off to compete in the 1979 World Veterans Athletics Championships in Hanover, Germany, which were due to start in 12 days time. He had just turned 40 so was eligible to compete. He did well, finishing 8th in the M40 10km walk (47:34.3) and 3rd in the M40 20km walk (1:36:50.7).

Two months later, he made a return trip to Germany for the Lugano Cup which was to be held in Eschborn on the weekend of 29-30 September. There, he competed in the 20 km event, coming 40th in **1:36:15**.



*Left: John competing in the 1979 Lugano Cup 20km trial in Melbourne
Right: John competing in the 1979 Lugano Cup in Eschborn, Germany*

I competed against John in many interstate matches and he was always a very tough competitor who headed out hard and was prepared to force the pace and apply pressure.

One particular race is worth a closer look. NSW nominated to host the 1978 Australian Centurion event, choosing the country town of Gosford as the venue. The original course was a 400m grass track at Adcock Park but continuous heavy rain over the days preceding the race rendered it unusable. A fallback course had been measured and it was decided to postpone the start and to use this alternate course. Thus the event was held on a lap of 380m in suburban streets. This change led to some initial chaos with competitors having to make last minute changes with respect to feeding tables, tents, etc. However, it was eventually sorted out and the race started at 1:30 PM in pouring rain. The rain continued unabated until 4.30 AM on the Sunday morning. The street circuit was poorly lit during the night and there were occasionally cars parked in the way of competitors. But it was not as bad as it sounded and the event continued. Of the 15 starters, only John was successful. He had chosen his 40th birthday to attempt his second Centurion race and his finishing time on this occasion was 18:49:20, second fastest ever behind Jim Gleeson's wonderful 1971 walk time. In so doing, he became Australian Centurion number 16.

For many years after his national career had ended, he continued to walk locally in NSW and even in 2000, at over 60 years of age, he was still able to complete the Sydney and Gold Coast marathons as a walker. Now, at 71 years of age, he still works full time in Sydney and cycles regularly to keep his fitness up. And, of course, he dusted off his walking shoes this year to set a NSW Country M60+ 3000m track walk record last weekend in Campbelltown.

It just goes to show that you can't keep a good man down!

Tim Erickson
2010