

LILLIAN HARPUR – SA AND AUSTRALIAN CHAMPION

It was not until the 1970's that women started to break the barriers and the first of those to question the long standing norms was **Lillian Harpur**.

Lillian walked in South Australia from 1970 until 1983. I remember her well as she won many Australian titles over the shorter distances of 3000m and 5000m and was renowned for her fighting spirit and never-say-die attitude. Many times she staggered over the line in complete exhaustion - a trait that few of us can develop - the ability to push ourselves to the absolute limit. During the period from 1972 to 1976 she was pre-eminent, winning the majority of the track and road titles on offer and from 1977 to 1983, she continued to mix it with the newer group of younger walkers, winning more medals. Overall she placed in national championships on 17 occasions and had 6 Australian Championship victories to her name. She also had many wins at the Federation level and many memorable battles with the likes of Alison Nicholls (now Alison Thompson), Sue Cook and Sally Pierson.



Left: 1972 Australian 5 km roadwalking championship in Canberra – Lillian leads Alison Nicholls
Right: 1973 Australian 3000m track championship in Hobart – Alison Nicholls leads Lillian

Her list of Australian Championship medals reads impressively (road first, followed by track)

Australian Women 3 km Road Championship

1971	Di Behan	NSW	15:15.6	Lillian Harpur	SA	15:40.4	Alison Nicholls	VIC	15:50.6
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Australian Women 5 km Road Championship

1972	Alison Nicholls	VIC	24:55.0	Lillian Harpur	SA	27:07.0	Bev Wilkins	NSW	28:08.2
1973	Lillian Harpur	SA	23:24.0	Alison Nicholls	VIC	24:29.0	Bev Wilkins	NSW	25:42.0
1975	Lillian Harpur	SA	25:59.8	Bev Wilkins	NSW	27:19.2	Rachel Thompson	NSW	27:30.6
1976	Lillian Harpur	SA	24:25.0	Sue Cook	VIC	25:05.0	Janette Whimpey	VIC	26:14.0
1977	Sue Cook	VIC	24:52.4	Lillian Harpur	SA	25:11.8	Rachel Thompson	NSW	26:08.8
1978	Lillian Harpur	SA	24:21.7	Rachel Thompson	NSW	24:55.4	Lorraine Young	VIC	25:44.6
1979	Sue Cook	VIC	24:47.4	Lillian Harpur	SA	24:55.0	Sally Pierson	VIC	25:04.2
1980	Sue Cook	VIC	24:14.0	Lorraine Jachno	VIC	24:38.0	Lillian Harpur	SA	24:53.8
1982	Sue Cook	VIC	22:27.9	Anne Ryan	NSW	24:27.0	Lillian Harpur	SA	24:38.9

Australian 20 km Open Women

1983	Sally Pierson	VIC	1:39:34	Lillian Harpur	SA	1:47:10	Lisa Harrison	NSW	1:53:17
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Australian Women 1500m Track Championship

1971	Di Behan	NSW	7:04.8	Gail Syrratt	NSW	7:18.1	Lillian Harpur	SA	7:22.0
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Australian Women 3000m Track Championship

1973	Alison Nicholls	VIC	14:17	Lillian Harpur	SA	14:53	Bev Wilkins	NSW	15:24
1974	Lillian Harpur	SA	14:21	Anne Pembroke	NSW	14:50	Bev Wilkins	NSW	15:42
1976	Lillian Harpur	SA	14:38.8	Alison Nicholls	VIC	14:46.8	Sue Orr	VIC	14:58.6
1977	Sue Orr	VIC	14:09	Lillian Harpur	SA	14:41	Rachel Thompson	NSW	14:52

Australian Women 5000m Track Championship

1978 Sue Orr VIC 24:21 Rachel Thompson NSW 25:04 **Lillian Harpur** SA 25:18

Her silver medal in the 1983 Australian 20km championship deserves special attention as she and her husband John, together with her daughter as passenger, rode their bicycles from Adelaide to Melbourne for the event. After taking silver behind Sally Pierson, they returned to Adelaide by cycle again.

Another of her outstanding feats was recording a world best 20km of 103:38 in 1977. Egon Rasmussen's World Race Walking Statistics book lists her as slashing 3:31 off Swedish walker Simm's world best with that performance.

However, her greatest walks were over the longer distances, and were generally unacknowledged and unrecognised. Lillian came to Australia in 1970 from Ireland and in her very first season at the age of 22 and with a young baby, she completed the SA 50 km event in **5:27:11**. This still stands as the second fastest 50 km time by ever by an Australian woman. When I asked Lillian how she had done such a feat in her first season of racewalking, she acknowledged that she had a background of trekking in the dales of Ireland. George White in his book "*Age is an Advantage: A History of Veterans Athletics in South Australia*" writes

Earlier in her native Ireland, even as a young child, distance meant little to her as she would often walk up to 60 miles in a day. In fact, on one rather momentous occasion, after a passing motorist had reported seeing a young girl and her dog early in the morning and the same girl about 30 miles away later in the day, the local police felt it was necessary to hold her and her dog in custody until a phone call established that she was just out for a day's walk.

The officials of that era in SA refused to acknowledge her long walks and never put her performances in the results. Thus the papers never record her performances and the official results never mention her. How tunnel-visioned many people were just a short while ago.

Lillian did not carry on with distance events under such adverse circumstances, only completing the occasional one. What a shame! If she could walk so well over the 50 km distance in her first season, what could she have done if she had had the motivation to keep going. An indication her potential is to be seen in her 30 km time of **2:47:13**, achieved on 23 Aug 1981 in the SA State Championship. She was in fact second overall to Peter Fullager and finished just ahead of George White.

Unfortunately Lillian was forced to retire from elite competition in 1983 after suffering a brain haemorrhage. She still competes occasionally in the Masters movement but is wary of pushing herself too hard.



Lillian competes in a 1980's Australian Masters championship (photo George White)

For completeness, the list of Australian women who have completed the 50 km walk in less than 6 hours follows

Lisa Wilson	W35	ACT	5:23:08	23/04/2004	World Masters Championships, Auckland, NZ
Lillian Harpur	22	SA	5:27:11	1970	SA 50 Km Championship, Adelaide, SA
Sandra Brown	50	ENG	5:29:58	18/09/1999	Australian Centurion 24H Walk, Coburg, VIC
Michelle Thompson	41	VIC	5:36:35	20/06/2010	Australian 24H Champs, Brisbane, QLD
Lillian Harpur	24	SA	5:41:03	1972	SA 50 Km Championship, Adelaide, SA
Liz Feldman	56	VIC	5:45:08	24/10/2004	VRWC 50 km Championship, Albert Park, Melbourne
Marlaine Stanway	42	VIC	5:52:03	05/09/1982	Victorian 50 km Championship, Albert Park, Melb.

Ann Staunton	36	ACT	5:53:23	22/07/2000	ACT 50 KM Championship, Canberra, ACT
Carol Baird	51	ACT	5:54:18	07/01/2001	Coastal Classic 12H Walk, Gosford, NSW
Carol Baird	53	ACT	5:55:55	13/04/2002	Australian Centurion 24H Walk, Coburg, VIC

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