

SPOTLIGHT ON PETER BENNETT

This article was written for the December 2010 edition of the Australian Centurions newsletter 'Centurion Footnotes'.

What better way to finish the year but with an indepth look at our best current ultra walker, Peter Bennett.

Throughout the 1980's and the first part of the 1990's, the Australian Centurions had been in recess with no events being scheduled and no club activity. What was needed was a reformed and rejuvenated Centurion Club and a formal meeting was held on Saturday 14 May 1994 to reform the club. Positions were reinstated as follows

- President Stuart Cooper (C 5)
- Vice President Tim Thompson (C 6)
- Sec/Treasurer Tim Erickson (C 13)

With this done, efforts were made to re-establish communications within the club, a regular newsletter was started (and it's still going!) and our first centurion qualifying event in many years was scheduled for October 1994 at the George Knott Athletics Track in Clifton Hill, an inner Melbourne suburb.

This event saw 7 starters, 3 new centurions and one wonderful performance that just missed out on the elusive 100 mile mark due to time constraints. Melbourne turned on its usual fickle weather. The race started in cool windy conditions at 1PM on the Saturday. We were soon greeted with a burst of rain and threatening clouds omened a bad time for all. Unbelievably the clouds rushed across the sky during the course of the afternoon but any further rain fell in other places and we were spared. The wind, however, continued to blow and as night fell, the temperature plummeted and competitors were forced to put on layers of clothing to protect themselves from the bitter cold and wind. 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.

Peter Bennett from Queensland, a relative unknown (to us anyway) 38 year old, took the lead from the gun and soon built up a considerable lead with a steady pace of 2:30 per lap. His technique was perfect and he presented a picture of stylish walking as he powered through the miles. Peter had not trained for or prepared specifically for this event and general opinion was that he would not last at this sort of pace. When would he hit the wall? We kept waiting. He passed the 50km mark in the very fast time of 05:11 and had a short rest. Then off again at about 02:45 laps. This was maintained until he reached the 50 mile mark in 08:46 (very fast). A short 15 min rest and then off again at about 03:00 min laps. Amazingly, he kept up this pace and his stylish technique throughout the second half of the race and actually sped up over the last 20 laps. He never showed any real distress throughout the race and finished as Australian Centurion 24 in an outstanding time of **19:42:54**, with general exhaustion but no specific problems of any kind. Those of us who had watched many 100 mile races thought his effort was one of the best we had ever seen and was what might be expected of a seasoned ultra-performer, not a novice to the game.

Behind him, fellow Queenslander Andrew Ludwig powered through to finish in 22:26:29 to become C25 and Victorian Ken Walters finished just behind him in 22:28:31 to become C26. The event also saw the emergence of Carmela Carassi who walked an Australian best of 92 miles 992 yards before she ran out of time. She would return the next year to become Australian centurion 27.



The 4 finishers in 1994 – Peter Bennett, Carmela Carrassi, Ken Walters and Andrew Ludwig

Skip forward 2 years:

Although we had our own 1996 Centurions event planned for Melbourne in October, the Queensland Race Walkers Club planned and put on their own event in September of that year as a fund-raiser for the Queensland Epilepsy Foundation. It incorporated a 24 Hour endurance walk, shorter walking races and a 24 Hour walk relay event. We gave this event our blessing, being of the mind that it was all good publicity for the club. I travelled up to assist in running the event which was held at the QE II Stadium in Brisbane, the site of the 1982 Commonwealth Games. The race saw two outstanding performances, the first being the qualification of Queensland based walker Caleb Maybir as C28 (23:34:20) and the second being the 100km performance of Peter Bennett who carried on from where he left off in the 1994 Centurions Race in Melbourne. This time, he powered through to a new Australian 100km walk record of **10:51:25**, breaking Ian Jack's 1979 record time of 11:19:10 by a fantastic 28 minutes.

The next year, Peter was back in Melbourne for our 1997 Centurion qualifier at Clifton Hill, keen to improve on his 100 km performance of the previous year. He headed off at the requisite pace but slowed due to the heat and persistent back problems, finally calling it quits at the 50 km mark which he passed in 5:23, a good walk at any time.

It would be another 6 years before we saw him back in action as an ultra distance walker. The pressures of work and a young family ensured that his focus was elsewhere. In 2003, I was approached by Khoo Chong Beng, the organiser of the inaugural Malaysia 24 Hour Walk, to be held in the Genting Highlands resort in August, with the offer of one free ticket for an official Australian representative. I approached Peter and he jumped at the opportunity. He had walked in the Australian 20 km championship in Brisbane in April, walked in the Canberra 20 miler in June and then won the Queensland 30 km walk title in mid July so he was in fine shape and the obvious choice to represent us. But then big trouble as he hurt his back at work only a couple of weeks before flying out. Despite intensive treatment he went over carrying a major injury and in other circumstances, would not have even fronted for the race. And he nearly pulled it off with a superb performance - he zoomed through the first 100 km in under 13 hours but as time went on, his back got so bad that he was forced off the track at the 15 hour mark. He finally returned some 3 hours later and limped along for the remaining 6 hours, finishing with **157.430km**, just 3 miles short of the 100 mile mark.



Peter (number 327, far left) in pensive mood before the start of the 2003 Malaysia 24 Hour Championship

Two years later, in September 2005, he was back at Genting Highlands to complete unfinished business, being one of 12 walkers who completed the requisite 162.5 km for Malaysia Centurions club membership. His performance over the tough 800m lap - **172.50 km**, 9th place overall and Malaysian Centurion Number 30. He also set a new Australian M45 24 Hour Record with his overall distance.

With the newly instituted Australian Ultra Distance Masters records now in full swing and with his two Malaysian walks under his belt, Peter had a new spring in his stride and a new enthusiasm for ultra distance walking. From 2006, he was a regular on the Australian ultra distance walking scene, setting a number of very impressive M45 records over a variety of distances.

His next big test was not long in coming when, in April 2006, he accepted a late invitation to compete in the 37th edition of the 24 Hours of Rouen in France. Unfortunately the event was marked by terrible climatic conditions. Of the forty competitors from ten different nations who started at 5PM on the Saturday, half retired within the first five hours because of the ceaseless rain, violent wind and icy cold (it rained for nearly the entire race). But Peter was not amongst

the retirees! With only a couple of days to get time off work, sort out his travel and pack, his third place with a career best distance of **176.175 km** was an impressive effort. Peter had turned 50 that year and could now celebrate the milestone in fine style.

The overseas trips continued when, in November 2006, he accepted an invitation to compete in the third edition of the annual Penang 12 Hour Walk in Malaysia. An amazing 495 competitors in a 12 hour walking race! As is to be expected, conditions were very hot and humid even though the race was held during the night. It was described as more of a "Survivor Penang" than a race. Once again, Peter performed magnificently in the tough conditions. The race was conducted in categories so there was no overall winner declared but he won the Men's Senior Veterans Category with 86 laps (**92.708 km**), the same number of laps as the winners of the Open Men's category.

The Queensland duo of Peter Bennett (M50) and Andrew Ludwig (M40) were a tough act to beat, as evidenced by their one-two finish in the Gosford Coastal Classic 12 Hour event in January 2007. A field of over 50 runners and walkers made this race one of the largest ever track based ultra events held in Australia and Andrew and Peter took all before them in the walking section. Andrew started fast, covering the first 50 km in 5:12:42, reached the 50 Mile mark in 8:55:52 and held on for a winning distance of 103.335 km, easily beating Robin Whyte's race record of 99 km. Peter did it the hard way, flying to Sydney on the Saturday morning and then catching the train up to Gosford for the Saturday 7PM start and taking second place with **98.349 km**. Straight after the race finished at 7AM on the Sunday morning, he did the reverse journey home. By the time he finally went to bed in Brisbane on Sunday evening, he had been up for 40 hours. Centurion Pat Fisher (C 53) took third with a good 81.808 km. Peter's comments:

"I would never have recorded that far if Andrew hadn't been in the race. At half way I was looking at about 92 km but actually felt much stronger in the latter stages of the race. I think I did more laps in the last two hours than the first two. Andrew and I raced the last couple of minutes and did about a 2.12 for our last 420 metre lap (the event was held in lane 3 of the grass track). No wonder some of the runners thought we were insane. Back at work today after a Christmas-New Year break. No ill effects from the race just a bit weary and I think I will end with a few more black toenails. I am a bit surprised actually as it is only six weeks since I did the 12 hour race in Penang."



Gosford 2007 - Peter, Andrew Ludwig and Pat Fisher (Copyright Doug Fitzgerald – reprinted with permission)

Later that year (August 2007), he was back in Malaysia for the next Malaysia 24 Hour championship and once again he walked well, coming 5th overall in the oppressive conditions with yet another centurion finish, this time with **165.26 km**

With the demise of the Gosford Classic 12 Hour, the Caboolture Dawn to Dusk 12 Hour event, held in February 2008, took on added importance in the Australian ultra calendar and that edition of the event saw a record field and a number of fine performances. And once again, the dynamic Queensland duo of Andrew and Peter were amongst the runners. On this occasion, Peter turned the tables on Andrew, winning with **100.700km** as against Andrew who achieved 93.026km. The race report acknowledged their performances as follows:

"We were all honored to a display of power walking or speed walking by Peter Bennett and Andrew Ludwig for near 7 hours, till Peter slowly worn down Andrew. They walked shoulder to shoulder for hours starting at 9kph, continuing to only drop a 1kph. Peter went on to walk 101kms, while Andrew achieved 93.026. Gentlemen, you were a pleasure to watch."

In fact, Peter set new Australian M50 Records for 12 Hours (100.700 km) and 100 km (11:55:14) on the 500m (certified) compacted decomposed granite surface.

June 2008 saw Peter again travelling overseas to become the first ever Australian entrant in the Colmar classic, contesting the Stages race - 6 stages over 3 days along the Paris-Colmar route for a total distance of 173 km. In what was without doubt the highest profile ever ultra walk by an Australian in Europe, he finished second to Daniel Foudjen of Cameroon, covering the distance in 19 hours 30 mins for an average speed of 8.872 km.

Fresh from his great race in the Stages event, Peter spent a productive three days at his work headquarters in the northern French city of Lille, enjoyed a few days sightseeing in Paris and then travelled to Rouen for his next appointment, a second appearance in the 24 Heures de Rouen Classic. And he completed it in style, winning easily. But surely no one expected a performance of this magnitude - his winning distance an amazing **214.65 km** or 133 miles for those old enough to remember. Putting that into perspective, Peter's Australian 100 km record was 10:51:25, Ian Jack's Australian 100 miles record was 17:59:30 and Jim Gleeson's 24 Hours Australian record was 196.490 km. In Rouen, Peter powered through the 100 km mark in around 10:30, passed the 100 mile mark in around 17 hours and covered 214 km in the 24 hours. Of course, our records are track based so we could not grant his statistics 'record' status but what a walk.



Peter Bennett in action in Rouen – a worthy winner with 214.65 km in 24 hours

A win in the Caboolture 12 Hour Classic walk division (**98.500km**) in February 2009 and then back to Europe in late May for yet another Rouen appearance and a repeat win with an almost identical distance of **213.855 km**. Peter led from the start, heading off at a devastating speed of 9.5km/hr and had soon broken away from all the other walkers except for Chinese contestant Aiguo Feng. As night fell, Feng lost contact and, from that point on, Peter was on his own as he lapped the 795m circuit with almost monotonous regularity. While others were forced to take breaks, Peter did what he does best and just 'kept on keeping on'. Perhaps the only reason he was slightly short of the previous year's record breaking distance was the hot weather that walkers encountered in the final stages of the event. The event certainly had an international flavour with the top finishers including walkers from France, China, Indonesia, Kenya, Algeria, Holland, Madagascar and, of course, Australia.

2009 saw him finish the year with his greatest ever workload as he completed two further centurion walks, firstly in Brisbane in June (**19:48:40** for 100 miles) in the Sri Chinmoy Australian 24 Hour championship, and secondly in August in Caboolture when he completed **177.300 km** in the Queensland 24 Hour Track championships.



Peter wins in Rouen in May 2009 – with 213.855km

Peter has been just as prolific in 2010, winning the annual Australian Centurions qualifier at Coburg in April (22:01:35 for 100 miles), achieving a PB distance of 216.240 km in coming second in the Rouen classic in June and appearing for the first time in the Australian 48 Hour Track Championship in August. Just to focus in on his 48 Hour walk for a little, his distance of **280.203km** saw him finish as the first Australian male (beating all the male runners!). It was his first 48 Hour race but he was able to do it in style, setting 4 new Australian Walk Track Bests along the way:

Australian Open Men 200km:	30:49:08
Australian M50 200km:	30:49:08
Australian Open Men 48 Hour:	280.203 km
Australian M50 48 Hours:	280.203 km

Peter also walked over 100 miles in the first 24 hours to register his 11th Centurion qualifier (100 miles in under 24 hours) and his third for the year. This surpasses the previous best by an Australian for the most number of Centurion qualifiers of 10, held by Carol Baird.



Rouen 2010 – and yet another fantastic walk by Peter Bennett – 216.240 km

Peter has now accumulated an amazing 11 centurion walks and shows no signs of slowing.

19:42:54	08-09 Oct 1994	Clifton Hill, Victoria	(C 24)
172.500 km in 24H	18-19 Sept 2005	Genting Highlands, Malaysia	(C 32)
176.175 km in 24H	15-16 April 2006	Rouen, France	
165.26 km in 24H	11-12 August 2007	Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	
214.65 km in 24H	5-6 July 2008	Rouen, France	
213.885 km in 24H	30-31 May 2009	Rouen, France	

19:48:40	27-28 June 2009	St Lucia, Queensland
177.300 km in 24H	1-2 August 2009	Caboolture, Queensland
22:01:35	17-18 April 2010	Coburg, Victoria
216.240 km in 24H	12-13 June 2010	Rouen, France
165.5km in 24H	31 Jul-1 Aug 2010	Caboolture, Queensland

A review of our current Australian Masters records list show Peter's name occurring 12 times (and it would be more except for the fact that so many of his walks have been in non-track races).

M35 50 Miles	8:46:39	Clifton Hill, Victoria	08/10/1994
M35 100km	11:23:25	Clifton Hill, Victoria	08/10/1994
M40 100km	10:51:25	Nathan, QLD	28/09/1996
M50 100km	11:55:14	Caboolture, QLD	10/02/2008
M35 100 Miles	19:42:54	Clifton Hill, Victoria	08/10/1994
M50 200km	30:49:08	Caboolture, QLD	01/08/2010
M35 6 Hour	56.640 Km	Clifton Hill, Victoria	08/10/1994
M50 12 Hour	101.120 Km	Caboolture, QLD	28/06/2009
M50 24 Hour	186.533 Km	Caboolture, QLD	28/06/2009
M50 100km	11:52:10	Caboolture, QLD	28/06/2009
M50 100 Miles	19:48:40	Caboolture, QLD	28/06/2009
M50 48 Hour	280.203 Km	Caboolture, QLD	01/08/2010

A review of our Open Records list shows his name appearing 3 times:

100 Km	Men	1996	Brisbane, QLD	10:51:25
200 Km	Men	2010	Caboolture, QLD	1:06:49:08
48 Hours	Men	2010	Caboolture, QLD	280.203 km

Peter, we salute you on a fantastic ultra career and wish you all the best as you continue to rewrite our record books.

Tim Erickson
December 22nd 2010