

VALE YVONNE MELENE

The Australian racewalking community has been saddened to learn of the passing of NSW coach extraordinaire Yvonne Melene, who died last week aged 82. She cast a huge shadow, with a string of outstanding walkers who broke records, represented Australia and won medals and accolades.



Athletics Australia National Junior Coach Brent Vallance has put pen to paper to write his own words of appreciation and will be attending the funeral today in Sydney.

The Athletics community in NSW, and the wider race-walking community across Australia, lost one of its great coaches last week, as the sad news spread of the passing of Yvonne Melene. Yvonne was a much-loved, and highly respected member of the Athletics community by coaches, officials, athletes and by the parents of the many junior athletes whom she influenced throughout her coaching career.

Yvonne's immediate impact on the athlete daily training environment during her most active period in Sydney during the 1990's, and her legacy that continues through to the present day, make her undoubtedly Athletics Australia's greatest ever National Junior coach across all the Athletics disciplines. I could not possibly do justice to her life of 82 years through what I write, but am happy to document the period I was coached by Yvonne in the mid to late 1990's, and I feel that a wider audience should know how much her contribution was to the Australian Athletics high performance program in the years that followed that period.

Her influence was highlighted at the 2004 Athens Olympic Games, when all selected Australian Racewalkers - Jane Saville, Natalie Saville, Cheryl Webb, Luke Adams, Nathan Deakes, and myself as the Team appointed coach – had been coached by Yvonne through the 1990's, either as juniors, or into their first senior Australian team.

In Athens, our walkers won two bronze medals through Nathan and Jane in the men's and women's 20km walks. Other coaches were in charge of both athletes on that day, but Yvonne's influence years earlier was what enabled our two best ever juniors to transition into the AIS National program, and have long and successful careers as International athletes. Australia has only ever won two medals in race-walking at the World Junior Championships. Both athletes were coached by Yvonne. They were the same two Olympic medallists later at the 2004 Olympic Games, Jane Saville and Nathan Deakes.

Jane won a silver in Seoul, Korea, at the 1992 World Junior Championship, and Nathan a bronze, 4 years later in Sydney at the 1996 World Junior Championships, both in national record times, putting best coaching practice on display, by having athletes arrive at Championships, in their best athletic shape.

Jane Saville and Nathan Deakes currently hold all recognised Olympic Distance Australian records at 20km, 20,000m and 50km Walks. There is much more that Yvonne would have looked back on proudly over their careers which included: World and Commonwealth Gold medals; World Cup Bronze and team medals; a World Record; Australian Athletics team captaincy; a Flag bearer at a Commonwealth Games just to rattle off a few. Her legacy through these athletes alone is something of which we, who were coached by Yvonne, are also proud.

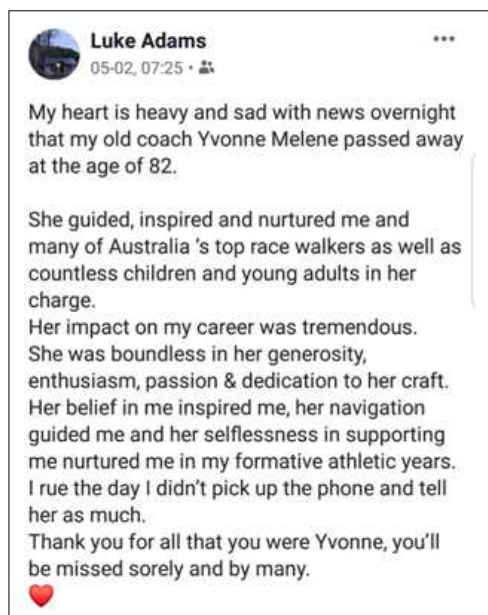


Jane and Nathan both medalled at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens

Apart from these two obvious success stories, a quick scan down the national records on the AA website this week shows the following records from Yvonne's athletes that were still standing at the start of the 2018/2019 Summer season.

3000M TRACK WALK			
Women's Aust U20	12:27.74	JANE SAVILLE NSW	25-Feb-93 MELBOURNE
Men's Aust U18	11:42.04	TROY SUNDSTROM NSW	21-Feb-98 SYDNEY
Men's Aust U16	12:09.30	TROY SUNDSTROM NSW	2-Feb-95 SYDNEY
5000M TRACK WALK			
Men's Aust U20	19:38.22	TROY SUNDSTROM NSW	19-Feb-00 SYDNEY
Men's Aust U18	20:06.90	TROY SUNDSTROM NSW	17-Jan-98 SYDNEY
Women's Aust U20	21:34.23	NATALIE SAVILLE NSW	1-Mar-97 MELBOURNE
10KM RACE WALK			
Women's Aust U20	45:10.00	NATALIE SAVILLE NSW	27-Feb-97 MELBOURNE

The amazingly talented triple Olympian Luke Adams was warm in his heartfelt thanks, and generous in his praise of Yvonne shared in his Facebook post.



Luke has walked under 1:20:00 at all three International Championships, having recorded 1:19:15 at a World walking Cup, 1:19:35 at a World Championships, and 1:19:56 at an Olympic games. All were Top 8 performances, and he was also to better those performances as a 50km walker late in his career, finishing an agonising 4th at the 2011 World Championships.



Luke Adams in action in the 2006 Commonwealth Games in Melbourne

My early memory of joining Yvonne's squad in late 1993, was Yvonne arriving at 7am at Centennial Park, after what had been a long drive in from Dural, via Ryde, after picking up a 16 year old Luke for Sunday training. Although never the same crowd each week, regulars included all of the names already mentioned, as well as whoever wanted to come and do a long walk – interstate visitors like Simon Baker, Jantien Saltet while studying at Sydney Uni, Keith Knox, Damien O'Mara, Luke Collis, and of course veteran athlete Baden. All were welcome!

Luke later that summer qualified for the World Junior Championships in Lisbon, Portugal, along with Natalie Saville, giving Yvonne's squad an Australian representative production line look and feel. This was because also that summer, Anne Manning and Jane Saville from Yvonne's squad were selected for Commonwealth Games. This continued in 1995, when I was selected to a World Cup, followed by Nathan Deakes and Troy Sundstrom gaining selection for the 1996 World Junior team. Yvonne was rewarded also that summer with her first Athlete (Anne Manning) being selected for the Atlanta Olympics, along with Jane Saville (then coached by Simon Baker at the AIS).

Anne Manning was an incredible trophy story for Yvonne, and one that all of us who were part of it, are happy to tell. Inactive as an athlete from 15yrs to 31, as a single mother to two boys, while she was in her 30's, she was working full time as a preschool teacher, was widowed in 1996, and as an athlete found the time to train and compete and became an Olympian that year. That Anne would train her easy morning 8-10km walk up and down her short 200m street in Earlwood at 6am, as she couldn't leave the boys on their own, shows how dedicated she was.

Yvonne and Anne were a great match when she again started athletics, as she was equally as dedicated to Anne, as Anne was to being an athlete. Yvonne provided great programming, which Anne followed to the letter, great analysis of her training, and great support when she was going through tough times with the loss of her husband. Yvonne seemed to be able to keep one eye on Anne's two boys (Scott and Chris) while Anne was training, and the other always on the stopwatch reading splits.

That fact that Yvonne traversed the entire geographical area of Sydney to get to a training session for wherever a talented athlete was, or went out of her way to pick up an athlete to provide them an opportunity, speaks volumes for her enthusiasm and dedication.

I joked on the phone over the weekend with Jane Saville, that my athletes start training as close to where I live in Melbourne most days. As an AIS coach, training always happened close to the AIS, I also lived in Bruce like many of the athletes, so it is remarkable to think of the kilometres Yvonne drove for our benefit.

Nowhere was too far. She drove 38km from where she lived in Dural, across the city in peak hour, to get to an afternoon session at ES marks Field, because that's the closest track to where the Savilles lived. It probably was not appreciated until in later years when Yvonne moved our regular training base to Homebush, that the Savilles then had to travel half the distance, and drive through the city in peak hour. We didn't see them as often after that, as they often stayed in the Eastern suburbs on weekday evenings.

The 40km to Narrabeen for lab or field-testing at the NSW Academy of Sport was also never a problem for Yvonne, but we would always complain. That journey was 74km each direction for Cheryl Webb, so she would instead would have her mum drop her at Yvonne's where she would stay the night and drive early with her the next day. I also remember a day at Bobbin Head when I shared the backseat of Yvonne's car with three sweating male athletes she had to drive back down the hill in her car for another 4km hill rep, again showing true commitment to the cause. Centennial Park, or to Homebush Bay,

Narellan for walkers club, or St Ives Showground, she was always there. She never missed a session or a race, or not that I can remember.

Yvonne opened her home to interstate athletes who wanted to be part of her squad. Nathan Deakes would often stay at Yvonne's home in Dural, when he was being coached by her for the first time in 1995. Nathan later relocated to Sydney for the winter of 1996, and was housed with fellow squad member Luke Collis. Nathan improved four minutes over a 15 month period in the lead-up to the World Junior championships, seemingly coming from obscurity to win our only ever men's World Junior medal in 41:11.

Yvonne provided me with my first coaching experience when I was invited by her to look after her squad at Westfield Sports High School while she was travelling. Yvonne in 1995 and 1996 travelled with Anne Manning to the preparation camps for World Championships and Olympic Games in those years, and I was left the coaching reigns of a young squad of distance runners and walkers.

Yvonne was very active in the ATFCA in coach education and coach mentoring. I can remember her mentoring through this period NSW coach Marilyn Pearson, while Yvonne coached her son Michael. Marilyn is still active in coaching today, and has coached athletes to World Youth, World Juniors and Commonwealth games in Walks, Steeplechase, middle distance, High Jump, and 400m hurdles, and I still follow the progress of her athletes today. This includes the former racewalker, and current national 400mH champion Ian Dewhurst.

Yvonne was my first real coach, in that she was the first to detail an entire Olympic Cycle plan, through to the Atlanta Olympics, and then had the audacity to suggest a medal at the Sydney Olympics. I'm sure she did this for us all, but I hadn't even registered with the walkers club for that winter, and had only raced 3000m and 5000m walks. When I was at University studying subjects in periodization, I could see how much Yvonne was spending researching, and studying what I was, in her spare time.

Since 2003, I have made a career out of coaching, and been to four Olympic Games as a coach. I also am working full time running an Athlete Development program at the Westfield Sports High equivalent in Melbourne (Maribyrnong Sports Academy). There are many sessions that my current squad of athletes do today that are straight out of my old programs, that were hand written, and delivered by Australia post in the mail from those early years. Jemima Montag's last session she did the day before her Commonwealth Gold medal, is straight out of the Yvonne Melene program from a tapering week I had in 1994, before track nationals. We have been doing this sessions as a pre-race routine over the last two years, which is time I value with Jemima before a big race.



2004 Olympic walkers Cheryl Webb, Natalie Saville, Jane Saville and Nathan Deakes – all proteges of Yvonne

My first meeting with Yvonne and what followed were definitely life changing for me. Like Luke, I missed the opportunity to relay that to her, and certainly have enjoyed chatting over the last few days with my current athletes, and others with whom I once trained, about her and the squad that I trained with.

Brent Vallance
National Junior Coach – Walks, Athletics Australia
Tuesday 7 May 2019