

## ALEX PHILPOTT

Alex, or "Potsy" as he was known in the walking world, was born on December 13, 1913 and started in athletics with St Marks Athletics Club around 1931.

In those days, St Marks was a strong club that was tied to the Sunshine Church of England parish. It also boasted a top walking team, led by Jim Gaylor. In the 1932-33 season, Alex joined the Victorian Amateur Walking Club and, under Jim's watchful eyes, started his career as a racewalker.

Alex remained a member of St Mark's club throughout his time in athletics and went on to become club secretary for a long period of time. The club folded in the late forties, a victim of the changing demographics of Melbourne, but during its time, it had many fine athletes.

His first recorded race with the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club was on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> May 1933 when he contested a 3 Mile Novice Handicap event at Albert Park. In that event, he finished 4<sup>th</sup> with a time of 27:01, racing off a handicap of 4 minutes and 30 seconds.

In September 1933, he formed part of the Victorian team that travelled to Sydney to contest the Victoria vs NSW 7 Mile Teams Race which was held at Weigell Oval. Although he only came 18<sup>th</sup> with a time of 61:11, it must have been a wonderful experience for a 19 year old athlete.



**Part of the Victorian team at Manly beach in Sydney in 1933. Alex is on the far right.**

He had his first racewalking win in November 1933 when he won a 1 Mile Handicap walk at the Malvern Cricket Ground. Off a handicap of 1 minute and 10 seconds, he won by 31 seconds in a fast 7:42.

Jim Gaylor was very much Alex's mentor and they did many training sessions together. Jim was the consummate long distance walker and Alex soon found that long training spins formed part of his initiation into the walking world. At one stage, Jim and he embarked on a weekend training walk from Sunshine to Lilydale and return. When they finally arrived back in Collingwood and stopped for afternoon tea, Alex had to catch the train to complete the final leg back home but Jim had no difficulty completing it on foot.

Even though Jim was a long distance walker, Alex's real forte lay in his speed. He excelled at the shorter distances and rarely ventured into the longer territory until the latter stages of his career. The longest event that he ever contested was the St Kilda to Frankston and return classic over 50 miles. Between 1946 and 1950 he started the event but on each occasion he failed to finish. In his last attempt, accompanied by his wife Jan who rode a bicycle and carried replenishments, he made it to Frankston and then disappeared. As Jan was riding back towards Melbourne, Alex waved to her as he passed in the train – he had retired at the 26 mile mark. We do not know the consequences of this action but can guess!

He did all athletic events and, with his natural speed, even did the occasional sparring session with his mate Al Baston who was an accomplished boxer. He was one of those multi-talented sorts of people – he played piano accordion and was a very good public speaker who compared dances, weddings and 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays with ease.

An example of his sporting versatility can be seen in the results of the Oakleigh 8 Hour Day Carnival, held on Monday 1<sup>st</sup> April 1935. On that occasion, Alex finished 6<sup>th</sup> in the 1 Mile Yacht Handicap walk (7:50), 2<sup>nd</sup> in the High Jump (4' 7"), 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Broad Jump (15' 1/2") and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Hop Step and Jump event (30' 9").

His career throughout the thirties was marked by numerous walking victories and trophies and he also contributed to the club on other levels. He joined the VAWC General Committee in 1936 and progressed to the position of Vice President in 1940.



**A typical photo of a summer season track race in the early 1930s. Alex is second from the right. The speed of the walkers is obvious from the photo. Well known walking identity Vin Mead is on the outside of Alex and the camera has caught him at full stride.**

His 1939 winter season was his best to date with regular places in various club championships and handicap events. His best performances that season included 4<sup>th</sup> in a club 5 mile handicap (40:10), 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 20 km club championship (102:37), 4<sup>th</sup> in the 10 km club championship (50:24) and 3<sup>rd</sup> in the club 20 mile handicap (3:11:17).

He was ranked around 4<sup>th</sup> in Australia leading up to 1940 behind the likes of Athol Stubbs and George Knott but, like all those of his era, the Second World War intervened and put paid to any such trivial pursuits.

In 1941, he joined the Commandos but, after a short time, it was realised that his skills in the steel industry were more important to the war effort and he returned to work at the ARC engineering plant where he was a steel bender. He prepared steel matings that were used for temporary runways and this sort of skill kept him at home. He worked at ARC during the day and, on 3 nights a week, he manned the anti-aircraft searchlights around Melbourne. Yet he still found time to coach a women's basketball team with considerable success.

Athletics resumed in 1946 and his performances simply continued on from 1939, seemingly no worse for the interruption of 7 years.

In the 1946 winter season, he won the Fastest Time award and was second in the Handicap Award. His two best walks were 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 25 ½ mile Melbourne to Frankston handicap event (4:10:20) and 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 20 Mile Club Championship (3:08:16). In both events, he was actually the fastest walker but most events in those days were decided on handicaps and Alex was one of the back markers.

1946 also saw him earn a silver medal in the Australian 10,000m track walking championship, dead heating for second with a young Ted Allsopp (fellow Victorian Alan Reid was the winner).

Just as he looked set to really kick on with his walking, his priorities changed and he turned instead to club administration. In 1947, he took on the dual roles of club Treasurer and Secretary and little was seen of him on the walking track for the next few seasons. He did take 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the Victorian 1947 10 Mile Track championship in a good time of 1:23:25 but that was the only highlight in an otherwise quiet year.

It was not until 1949 that he returned to the road as a regular competitor and he found himself chasing a new track star, Waldemar Skujens-Grandy (or Bill Grandy as he preferred to be known). Grandy was a Latvian international who took all before him after migrating to Melbourne in late 1948 and joining Coburg Harriers.

Alex accepted the role of club Vice Captain and was soon racing faster than ever before. He took second in the Victorian 10,000m walk championship (52:32) and won the Victorian 10 Mile Track Championship (1:25:36) ahead of Grandy and Les Hellyer – this was his first ever Victorian Championship after many seasons of racing.

His good form was rewarded when he was nominated as Captain of the Victorian Team that travelled to Sydney for the Australian 10 Mile Track Championship, held on the Showgrounds track. Grandy was the hot favourite but, in a surprise result, it was Alex who won by the length of the straight with the Latvian walker a distant second.



**The start of the 1949 Australian 10 Mile championship in Sydney. Winner Alex Philpott is fourth from the right.**

A repeat victory over Grandy in the 1950 Bendigo Easter carnival was just as pleasing. It was a rough and ready existence for walkers in those days – when they travelled to Bendigo each year, they spread hay and slept on the floor of the cattle sheds!

Throughout his walking career, he was never disqualified and was only in trouble once. On that occasion, he was repeatedly interrupted by a walker who kept clipping his heels. Alex stopped and laid him out – and received a month's suspension for his troubles!

He was forced to retire from athletics in the early 1960's due to ill health and complications arising from surgery and it was not until 1968 that he returned to sport, this time as a coach. He accepted a request to coach at the local Little Athletics Centre and threw himself into it with gusto. In 1969, he took on the additional role as club coach for the Sunshine Womens Athletics Club. Starting with a small group of 10 girls, he soon built up to a squad of 40 keen athletes of varying abilities. He coached all events and even took out formal coaching qualifications with the fledgling Australian Track and Field Coaches Association.

In 1970, the Victorian Government Department of Youth, Sport and Recreation, started to promote the idea of general community fitness and recommended jogging as an activity for all. Alex was against this and argued strongly that walking was a safer and more rewarding fitness activity more suited to the general population.

In this context, the Government wished to obtain some photos of runners running down the brand new Altona/Williamstown off-ramp on Geelong Road. PRA Oil Refinery organised a coup and it was Alex, resplendent in his tracksuit and walking the perfect straight line, whom the official photographers found when they arrived. So walking got the last laugh and made the headlines ahead of running.



**The famous 1970 photo of Alex on the new Geelong Road off-ramp**

He died on January 18, 1996 at age 82. Like the other walkers of his era, he was a larger than life character who left his imprint on Australian sporting life,. We are proud to remember his achievements in our sport.

He is survived by his wife Jan who now lives in Bendigo and by his children and their families.

Tim Erickson  
Secretary  
Victorian Race Walking Club

14 February 2005