

## ALISON THOMPSON nee NICHOLLS

With a father (Stan Nicholls) and a brother (Graeme Nicholls) fully committed to athletics and a mother who spent her 'spare' time lap scoring and timekeeping, it was not surprising that Alison would eventually become involved in athletics. Stan was Australia's representative at the 1938 Empire Games, finishing 5<sup>th</sup> in the 3 miles final. Graeme was a well-performed junior and senior walker in the 1960s and 1970s, winning medals in numerous Victorian and Australian titles (Graeme was Australian 3000m track champion in 1970).

But it was not until 1970 when she was 17 years old, that Alison 'found' walking. The school she attended in Ballarat introduced an 800 metre race walk event into the Combined Secondary School Sports Day, a special day of events held each year. The organisers of the Sports Day events asked her to participate in the walk race as her brother and her father both competed in race walking events. So with help and advice from her father, she discovered from the very first race that she had the ability to win. However, she was in her final year at school so she put her 'walking' aside until the following year.



**A walking family – Graeme, Alison and Stan Nicholls**

When she started to train again the following year, she travelled to the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club in Melbourne every Saturday (about 1½ hours each way by car) to compete and continued to win most races.

*“Previously I had not been interested in playing any sport, so to discover that I had the natural ability to race walk and to achieve first place was very encouraging and something new and exciting for me. Every time I raced in an event I seemed to walk a faster time than previously.”*

*“My father and brother, who also competed at the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club each week, gave me great encouragement and confidence in myself to succeed. I could not have achieved all that I did in race walking on my own. My father and I trained together most nights of the week, no matter what the weather was like, and sometimes it was very wet and cold! He was always there to record my lap times at every race and to follow up record times which I had set.”*

The officials told her that she had the ability to compete in the Australian Road Walk Championships in Brisbane that year if she continued to train and race regularly. This she duly did and was rewarded with third place behind Diane Behan (NSW) and Lilian Harpur (SA) in the Australian 3 km road walk championship. This was the first in a series of close races producing world leading times by these three girls.

In 1972, Alison won the Victorian 800m track walk and took second in the National 1500m track walk in Perth. This 1972 National title saw Diane Behan set a new women's 1500m world track walk record. Alison was also under the old record in finishing 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Shortly after this race, Alison set a new World Best for the 1 Mile Walk. The date was 30 April 1972, the venue was the Melbourne University track and her time of **7:24** took 3 seconds of the 1944 time of May Johansson of Sweden.

Later in 1972, Alison won her first national title, defeating Lilian Harpur and Bev Hayman (NSW) in the inaugural Australian 5 km road championship in Canberra, with a personal best time of **24:55**.



**Alison on her way to victory in the 1972 Australian 5 km roadwalking championship in Canberra**

The following summer, her great form continued with her winning time of **14:17.4** over Lilian and Bev in the national 3,000m track championship in Hobart in March 1973 slashing 8 seconds off the then World Best, held by Elizabeth Olsson of Sweden.



**Alison beats Lilian Harpur to win the 1973 Australian 3000m walk championship in a new World Best time**

Alison followed these track victories with a win in the 1973 LBG roadwalk, beating Bev Hayman. A second placing to Lilian Harpur in the 1973 5 km road title (and yet another PB time of **24:29**) was to be her last major championship until she completed her nursing studies.

She returned for the 1975/1976 track season, winning the Victorian 3000m track title and finishing second to Lilian Harpur and in front of Sue Orr in the Australian 3000m track title.

This effectively marked the end of Alison's brief and stellar career. A whole new life beckoned and Alison moved on.

*“It was unfortunate that when I was race walking in the early 1970's there were no events overseas for women to compete in. I always needed to have a different challenge ahead of me to train for and to keep me interested. Looking back, I feel that I was very fortunate to gain the success and recognition for my personal achievements in a sport which, at that time, was not widely known about. I often reflect back on these memories. I am also very grateful for the many friendships I made at that time which have lasted me a life time.”*

Two children and nine years later she joined the Victorian Veterans Association and, competing for the Croydon venue under her married name of Thompson, won her age titles. Since then, she has competed regularly at the Masters level, simply for the enjoyment of it.

Like many masters walkers, she actually walked faster in her later years over some distances than she had done as a young walker. For instance, in June 2004 in a VRWC club race at Albert Park, she recorded a 10 km time of 54:45, a 1 minute PB and a world class time for the W50 age group.

Now in the W55 age group, she still competes with distinction in the Masters racewalking events at State and National level.



**Masters walker Alison Thompson**

A brief summary of Alison's major Championship medals follows

1971	Australian Women 3 km Road Championship	3 <sup>rd</sup>	15:50
1972	Victorian Women 800m Championship	1 <sup>st</sup>	3:35.3
1972	Australian Women 1500m Championship	2 <sup>nd</sup>	6:54.7
1972	Australian Women 5 km Road Championship	1 <sup>st</sup>	24:55
1973	Victorian Women 800m Championship	1 <sup>st</sup>	3:32.0
1973	Australian Women 3000m Track Championship	1 <sup>st</sup>	14:17
1973	Australian Women 5 km Road Championship	2 <sup>nd</sup>	24:29
1976	Victorian Women 3000m Championship	1 <sup>st</sup>	
1976	Australian Women 3000m Track Championship	2 <sup>nd</sup>	14:46.8

Finally, the World Best Time progressions for 1 Mile and 3000m clearly show Alison's contribution

#### **1 mile race walk, track**

7:27	May Johansson/Bengtsson	SWE	20.09.1944	Stockholm
7:24	Alison Nicholls	AUS	30.04.1972	Ballarat
7:15	Susan Brodock	USA	26.01.1974	Cypress

#### **3000m race walk, track**

14:25	Elisabet Olsson	SWE	23.07.1972	Örebro
14:17	Alison Nicholls	AUS	05.03.1973	Hobart
14:14	Britt Holmquist	SWE	03.08.1974	Sala