

William Murray

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| 1912 | Olympic Games | Stockholm | 10,000m | DQ in heat |
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Bill Murray, born on 17th April 1882 in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond, was an incredible sporting personality by any measure. Joining the Melbourne Harriers as a young man, he quickly developed into a top class runner.

His best performance was held to be in the 1910 seven mile open race at Brighton where he secured first and fastest time prizes with 36:21. There was a big field of 108 competitors, including E. Voight, fresh from Olympic and world championship triumphs.

In that same year, he also won the Victorian 10 mile track race and is credited as winning the first marathon run in Melbourne. This event ran from Frankston to Melbourne and he won in 2:58:48. This remained the best marathon time by a Victorian until beaten by Percy Cerrutti 36 years later (when he won the 1946 Victorian marathon in 2:58:11).

His debut as a walker came when he was asked to take part in a race to fill a poor field. To his amazement and the delight of his club, he won. Two weeks later he walked in two races in Melbourne and beat Australian record holder A. O. Barrett.

His walking really came to the attention of people in 1911 with his wins in the Victorian 1 mile (**6:40.8**) and 3 mile (**22:38.6**) walk events. His 1 mile time was a new Victorian and Australasian record, beating A. O. Barrett's 1896 time of 6:42.0.



Left: Bill Murray in 1912 – Australasian record holder

Right: Sterling silver cup – Australasian Walking Championship Prize for Best Style, presented by J.E. Fowler-Dickson to W. Murray (cup minted 1904, year of presentation unknown)

The next year, he was even faster, winning the titles once again with records that the general sporting population could hardly credit – his 1 mile time was **6:22.8** and his 3 mile time was **20:56.0**.

The NSWAAA Council Meeting of 12th March 1912 acknowledged these feats, along with a subsequent World Record time of **14:49.4** over the 3500m distance.

Another remarkable performances is credited to W. Murray, the selected representative from Victoria for the Olympic Games. In Melbourne last Saturday, he established a new world's record for the 3500 metres walk, his time for the journey being 14m 49 2-5s. He covered the first mile in 6m 35s, and the two miles in 13m 42s. Murray thus lowered the existing figure of 14m 55m made at the Olympiad in Shepherd's bust, London, on July 14, 1908, by G. E. Larnier. At the Victorian A.A.A. championship meet last month, Murray created a new world's record for the one-mile-walk, and also established an Australasian record for the three miles. His performances have since then been subject to criticism, regarding the possibility of establishing the times under the strict Australasian rules of walking. The fact that Murry has been allowed to finish upon each occasion proves that the

judges have been satisfied with his walking. In condition, he will worthily represent Australasia in Stockholm; the distance of the walk will be 10,000 metres, but this should not trouble him as his staying powers have been exhibited in "Marathon" races that he has taken part in, both in Sydney and in Melbourne.

Indeed a rumpus was on. The chairman of the Australian Amateur Athletic Union, Mr Richard Coombe had commented "No man in the world can walk that fast." And others had joined the chorus. But Bill was strongly supported by A. O. Barrett, whose records he had just broken. Barrett was the founder of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club (1884) and was a highly regarded official at this time. He actually judged in the 1912 races and had this to say about the performances:

It was my pleasure to judge the Amateur Championships held on the St. Kilda Cricket Ground on 24th February, 1912, when W. Murray broke my records in the 1 mile and 3 miles Championships of Victoria, and set fresh records for Australasia.

The day was sunny, no wind, and cool. In both those races he walked absolutely faultlessly, and the cheers of the spectators during the last laps must have been as gratifying to him as it was to all of us in the official part of the arena, and only proves what a valuable and noble contest a walking race is in our sports when it is exemplified by a properly trained athlete,

The new records he created were one mile in 6 min. 22.8 sec., and later on the same afternoon he walked the three miles in 20 min. 56 sec. For these details I am indebted to the Hon. Sec. of the V.A.A.A., Mr. F. H. Pizzey.

These 2 performances were so ahead of their time that they withstood all challenges over the next 36 years. When the last Victorian 1 mile and 3 mile walk championships were held in 1948, they still stood as championship records. George Knott walked 21:29.0 to win the 3 mile in 1940 and walked 6:23.2 to win the 1 mile in 1948 – close to but not as good as Bill's 1912 performances.

At that time the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club did not exist and Bill walked as a member of the Victorian Walking and Touring Club.

On the basis of his outstanding walks, he was selected to compete for Australasia in the 1912 Olympics. History shows that he was disqualified but there is more to the story as he elaborated in later years

The Australian team struggled from the time it landed in Europe. We had to fend for ourselves and were not properly fit. We were not there long enough to become fit. There were no Olympic Villages. You had to find your own accommodation and eat in cafes.

Indeed, there was perhaps even more to the disqualification than he acknowledged. He was one of 3 walkers disqualified in his heat, and in the final only four walkers finished, three being disqualified and another three failing to finish. Judges had the right to unilaterally pull anyone off the track without previous warnings and the overall standard of judging was almost certainly overzealous.



The 1912 Olympic 10,000m walk final - the overzealous judging clearly on show

Racewalking, in only its second Olympic Games, was being issued with a red card. After further controversies in the 1920 and 1924 Games, the Olympic fraternity finally lost patience with this troublesome sport and the International Amateur Athletic Federation voted to exclude walking from future Olympic programmes (9 votes to 8), the French representative expressing the hope, in view of the difficulties experienced by judges at former Games, *“that the event would be omitted for ever from the programme of the Olympiad.”*

Once Bill returned from the Olympics, he put the disappointment behind him and continued his local Victorian athletic career (there were few Australasian titles in those days). He won the Victorian 3 mile titles in 1913-1915 to make it 5 title wins in a row. He also showed good distance potential, winning the inaugural Victorian 25 mile walk in 1914 in 3:58:15 (a time that stood as the Australasian record for many years, finally being bettered in 1927).

The outbreak of World War 1 put an end to further sporting aspirations for Bill and all other Australasian walkers, and he was one of the many who enrolled in the Armed Forces. It was not until 1920 that Victorian Championships were resumed, but then, Bill was 38 years of age. Despite his age, he still won the 1920 State 1 mile and 3 miles championships, albeit in considerably slower times (7:05.8 and 24:20.6) than in previous years. That made six Victorian 3 mile titles in a row (1911-1915, 1920).

He was one of the foundation members of the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club in 1922 and remained a member for many years. His serious walking now behind him, he continued to compete for the love of the sport rather than for anything grander. He still placed in the occasional championship - third in the 1922 Victorian 25 mile walking title in 4.21.50 and third in the 1924 Victorian 10 mile walking title in 1.25:57. Bert Gardiner was second in the latter race. As one career was ending, another was starting.



Bill Murray in 1924 – still looking fit and keen

He maintained his enthusiastic involvement throughout the twenties and, as he approached 50 years of age, was still able to place 11th in the 1930 Victorian 10 mile walking title in just under 90 minutes (a performance that would still fare well in Masters circles nowadays).

He also continued running with Melbourne Harriers and took over the Presidency of that club in 1930. He was a regular in the club runs of the time and won his fair share of club handicaps throughout this period.

He was still racewalking in 1931 when Frank McGuire started but he retired soon after to play golf, which he did with great success into his nineties. In fact, in 1964 on the Victoria golf course, when 82 years of age, he went around the 18 holes in less than his age. This is a feat that few ever achieve – Don Bradman did it in his seventies.



Bill Murray at 90 years of age

On 4 September 1971, in the Sporting Globe Magazine, an article was published on Bill Murray and the above photo was taken. At that stage Bill was 90 years old and was Australia's oldest practicing solicitor. From Monday thru Thursday he still walked from his home in West Brunswick to his office in Collins St and put in a day's work and then he played golf on Friday thru Sunday. He still drove his own car and was Australia's only remaining pre-World war One Olympian.

He died on 12th November 1977, aged 95, in Brisbane.

Bill was truly a remarkable personality on every level and we are unlikely to see his equal again.