

## ERIC SUNDERLAND

Les Mudge, a former member of the Melbourne Harriers and stationed at Mildura, wrote this upon seeing Eric Sunderland's 1 mile walk in a Mildura carnival in December 1925:

*“As one who was connected with amateur athletics in this State for many years.....I declare, without any fear of expert contradiction, that both in style, pace and general brilliance, E. S. Sunderland, the young Victorian champion, stands in a class by himself. I have watched this boy's meteoric rise to fame with great interest, and I feel that Sunderland is certain to break even W. Murray's wonderful figures in the not too distant future. At the last Mildura carnival, Sunderland's 6min. 44sec. was a mere exercise stroll. Provided he is fit and well when the Australasian championships come on for decision, you will find that George Parker and others will be outclassed by E. S. Sunderland, the best walker the world has ever known.”*

That's what you call a huge wrap and might have gone to the head of a lesser walker. But Eric (Mo) Sunderland was a huge talent and it was not long before he had people wondering if Mudge's prediction was in fact true. His few years in the sport make for fantastic reading and one can only wonder what he could have done if circumstances had been different and opportunities more prevalent.



**Eric Sunderland – an easy tireless action**

Short and slimly built, he was initially considered a sprint walker. With a particularly long stride for his size and great hip flexibility, his easy tireless action was reminiscent of A. O. Barrett. Yet with training, he developed into a wonderful long distance athlete.

He showed great promise in his first ever walk in 1922, beating J. B. Merrifield, then an experienced walker, by 100 yards in a one mile event. He won this event after running a mile and only took part in the walk to please his Melbourne team mate Mudge. He preferred running but it was evident to Mudge that he was ideally suited to walking. It took him two further years to convince Sunderland that he should abandon running and dedicate himself to walking.

After a promising first season on the road, he was selected in the Victorian team to contest the inaugural 1923 Australasian Walking Clubs' 7 Mile Championship and came a gallant sixth in 58:55, only 90 seconds behind NSW winner Ernie Austen. But he did not build on this solid start, preferring instead to mix it with the runners.

It was not until the start of the 1924-25 Track season that Sunderland's walking career really started to blossom. By then he was a regular competitor in the 'A' Grade mile and was the only walker capable of matching N. R. (Norman) Asker, the current Victorian champion. It must have looked incongruous to see the 5'3" Sunderland matching it stride for stride with the 6'6" Asker. The honours were evenly split over the summer with the same pattern continuing at the Victorian Track and Field Championships. Asker, a St. Stephens walker, won the One Mile Walk championship in 6:58.5 with Sunderland taking second while Sunderland won the Three Mile Championship in 22:49.0 after shadowing Asker for most of the race and applying continuous pressure until Asker finally cracked and was disqualified. Tumultuous applause greeted his first Open Championship win.

As the 1925 Winter season rolled on, Sunderland was unassailable on the Victorian front, winning the opening VAWC 5 mile handicap in 38:08, capturing the VAWC 5 Mile Championship from scratch over the same course in 37:56 and then winning the 6 Mile Championship in 45:17. He also recorded a remarkable 5 mile time of 36:42 but it could not be submitted for record purposes as the event was run by VAWC rather than VAAA. Surprisingly, he then opted to bypass the trial walk set by the Victorian selectors and he was controversially left out of the Victorian team for the 1925 Australasian Walking Clubs' 7 Mile Championship to be contested in Adelaide.

The 1925-26 Summer season saw him back in action again after a break of many months. The early season highlight was his One Mile walk in December 1925 in Mildura (see comments above). Paced early by Victorian Junior champion Bert Gardiner, Sunderland was soon well in front and obviously in a class of his own. His beautiful walking style and faultless heel-and-toe action so intensely interested onlookers that almost complete silence reigned around the arena while he was walking. His finish, in a time of 6:44.0, was loudly applauded. This was one of a number of startling performances in the first half of the summer (including a leading time of 21:42 for the 3 Miles) but surprisingly, he chose not to contest the Victorian and Australian Track championships. This was probably tied to the fact that around this time he relocated to Mildura and joined Mildura Harriers, where his former coach Les Mudge was secretary.

Under the watchful eye of Mudge, 1926 was a year to remember. He foreshadowed his intentions with a 6 mile walk at the Mildura Recreation Reserve. His time of 43:42.4 was well under the current Australasian record but was not ratified by VAAA due to the nature of the meet.

Then in March, he produced one of the greatest walks ever seen in Australia when he won the Victorian 10 Mile Track Walking Title in the new World Record time of 1:14:39.6. He was some 6 minutes ahead of second place getter Bert Gardiner and well below the current world best of 1:15:57.4, set by George Lerner in London in 1908. In fact, his walk smashed all Victorian and Australasian records for 5 Miles onwards. This winning time would not be beaten on the local front until 1952 when Ted Allsopp won the title with 1.14:37 – it took 26 years for a Victorian walker to match his time.

He showed in August 1926 that this walk was no fluke when he travelled to NSW to contest the NSW 7 Mile Walking Championship at the Sydney Showgrounds. 1920 Olympic silver medallist George Parker was expected to win but Sunderland beat him on his own home ground with a time of 55:45.2. Then later in the season, he won the annual Australasian Walking Clubs' 7 Mile Championship in 55:16.6 ahead of fellow Victorian Bob Osborne.



#### **Sunderland wins the 1926 Australasian 7 Mile Championship and the 1927 Frankston to Melbourne events**

1927 saw him testing himself over the longer distances. First he won the annual Frankston to St. Kilda 25 mile classic in an Australasian best time of 3:53:16.4, beating Bill Murray's record by 5 minutes. Considering the appalling weather conditions, this was a remarkable feat, yet it was accomplished by training for three nights a week for three weeks. He then followed this up with a win in the VAWC 20 Mile Championship, becoming the first Australian walker to break 3 hours. His time of 2:57:06 was well ahead of Murray's best time of 3:06:36.

Yet, he chose not to defend his Australasian 7 Mile Walk title. Such was his seeming ambivalence towards walking. With his discipline excluded from the 1928 Olympics, what was left for a man of his ability to pursue. It is not surprising that he looked for other ways to make the papers. Amongst the most astounding was his dance of 50 Miles from Geelong to Melbourne in 1928. The following newspaper article sets the scene.

## DANCING FROM GEELONG TO MELBOURNE Man Starts Off In the Rain

*With relays of girl partners, he started from the Geelong Town Hall at 9.30 a.m. Today. He expects to arrive at Green Mill, Melbourne, at 9.30 tonight. Sunderland is a champion walker,- world's champion in fact – over seven, eight and nine miles. He began by dancing at six miles an hour over the granite road that leads to Separation Bridge. He might have enjoyed it but his partners certainly did not. Their shoes and stockings were quickly worn out and the pace was all right for a champion but breathless for a girl used to polished floors and gliding steps.*

*And the wet road and intermittent rain did not improve matters. He danced to gramophone music broadcast through amplifiers from a car which followed him. Legions of boys on bicycles were out with him as far as the Ford works.*

*Striking a fairly fast pace, Sunderland danced the first mile in ten minutes, two miles in twenty minutes and four in forty minutes. At 10 o'clock, he had passed the Ford Factory at North Shore.*



**50 MILES OF  
DANCING!!**

ERIC SUNDERLAND  
(Holder of 37 Australian  
(Walking Records))  
WILL DANCE  
From  
**GEELONG to MELBOURNE  
TOMORROW**

MR. ERIC SUNDERLAND will commence the dance at 9.30 a.m. tomorrow morning. He will be assisted by the orchestra at the Green Mill. Music for the dancing will be provided from a gramophone car. Relief partners will be supplied. MR. SUNDERLAND IS GOING TO SET A WORLD'S RECORD FOR DISTANCE DANCING.

**SEE THE FINISH AT THE  
GREEN MILL**



**Geelong to Melbourne at a foxtrot!**

Needless to say, he was just as successful in this endeavour as he was in all personal challenges that he set. By way of an interesting byline, his dance was discussed at a meeting of the council of the Victorian Amateur Athletics Association. A letter had been received from the Walkers Club asking for a ruling regarding his amateur status. Mr. L. Nichterlein (University) had said that the affair was likely to injure amateur athletics. Mr. W. Billsborrow said that dancing was not forbidden by the rules of the association. If money had been paid to Sunderland, objection might be taken to the performance, but until it was discovered whether Sunderland had been paid for his performance, it would be useless to argue about the matter. The chairman (Mr. A. C. Dredge) commented that if a man received 1000 pounds a year for dancing, no slur would necessarily be cast on his amateur status. It was decided to refer the matter to the executive for inquiry. No action was taken against Sunderland.

The last time he was mentioned in the papers was later that same year when the following was published

*Eric Sunderland wants to do something extraordinary. This is what he writes: "I see in The Sporting Globe that MacLeod and Opperman have been breaking the Adelaide-Melbourne and Sydney-Melbourne cycling records. I would like to be in on a little record breaking myself. I think you know me. I hold 37 Australian and 3 World's records and I have danced from Geelong to Melbourne. I also won the Frankston to Melbourne walk in the Australian record time of 3 hours 53 minutes. I knocked one minute 20 seconds off the world's record for 10 miles. Well, I want to have a chance of running from Sydney to Melbourne or from Melbourne to Sydney. I don't care which. I am certain I can do it. The further the better is how I like it. If you can interest anyone, I will be ready to go right on with the task."*

There were no takers. In fact, it would be nearly 50 years before someone would complete the run between Sydney and Melbourne.

Sunderland was a pork butcher at a time when people worked hard and leisure time was non-existent. His job meant early hours and long days and, from our modern perspective, his training was intermittent and minimal. He flitted into and out of the sport and never really put more than 6 months of training together at any one time. Yet his performances stand out in their brilliance. He was indeed one of our greatest walkers and we can only wonder what he could have done if he had experienced the opportunities that are on offer in the modern era.