

GORDON DOAK: 22/08/1931 – 12/04/2015

When Gordon Doak died on Sunday 12th April 2015, aged 83 years, the Victorian Race Walking Club lost another of its old walkers. But there was a lot more to Gordon than just his walking as you will see if you read on.

Gordon joined the Victorian Amateur Walkers' Club (VAWC), as it was then known, as a young man and was mentored in his walking by fellow western suburbs walker Jim Gaylor. Although Jim was many years his senior and in the twilight of his own illustrious career in the early 1950's, they became firm friends and remained so throughout their lives.

Gordon was tall (over 6 feet in the old parlance), fair, blond, blue eyed and “drop dead handsome” and, like so many of his era, a true gentleman who was never known to smoke or drink or swear. He was also a pretty decent walker, coming second in the Glover Shield Junior 10,000m interstate walking carnival in 1951.

If 1951 was his initiation into the world of racewalking, it was a stellar one as the winter season saw a whole swag of wins and places in VAWC races and saw him win the overall style award for the season. In fact, VAAA judge, Bert Gardiner declared that Doak “has a walking style which could not be bettered”.



*Left: Early 1950's - VAWC walkers Norm Sweeney, Gordon Doak and Jim Gaylor
Right: Gordon, front left, with other VAWC walkers and officials of the same period*

With the 1952 Olympics in the offing and with walkers in need of qualifying opportunities, the Victorian Amateur Walkers' Club decided to conduct its own pre-Olympic opportunities, scheduling a 50km road walk on Saturday 15th December 1951 at Albert Park. The event, sanctioned by the Victorian Amateur Athletic Association, started at 7:30AM and fingers were crossed that it would not be a torrid summer day. Luck was with the Victorians, with fine cool conditions greeting the walkers at the start line and rain falling for nearly 2 hours from the 6 miles to the 16 miles marks. Final results read as follows

VAWC Pre-Olympic 50km Trial, Sat 15 Dec 1951

1.	Len Chadwick	VAWC	5:03:21
2.	Gordon Doak	St Marks A.A.C	5:07:10
	W. Knott	Sth Melbourne A.A.C.	Retired
	John Busst	Collingwood A.A.C.	Retired
	Les Hellyer	Brunswick A.A.C	Retired

Young Gordon put in an excellent performance in finishing 2nd, only 600yds behind the current Victorian champion Len Chadwick. His time of 5:07:10 was outstanding for a 20 year old at that time and was only 12 minutes outside the Olympic standard of 4:55:00 that had been set by the Australian Amateur Athletic Assn.

The official 50km Olympic trial was held on Saturday 2nd February 1952 in Melbourne, starting just after 11AM at Olympic Park. This was designated as the first ever Australian 50km Championship and from then on, an Australian 50km championship would be scheduled every even year. The course saw walkers complete 2 laps of the track before

proceeding along Batman Ave, Sturt St and Moray St to Albert Park, where they completed 7 laps of the lake before returning the same way to Olympic Park and completing a final 3 laps on the track. The weather was fine and sunny at the start and remained that way throughout the day, the temperature increasing as the race progressed and the torrid conditions taking an obvious toll on the field, only 3 of the 11 starters actually finishing.

Chadwick walked heroically, finishing over 30 minutes ahead of second placed Medcalf, but well outside the required 4:55:00. Gordon put in another creditable performance in gaining third place but was badly effected in the heat, finishing in a very slow 5:50:14. Sadly, he effectively retired from serious racewalking at that stage and turned to his other love of weight lifting. It was a case of waiting another 4 years for the next Olympics or getting on with his life.

For many years, Gordon kept secret the fact that he was homosexual, as homosexuality was looked down upon in the 1950's and 1960's, and it was not until he was in his thirties that he quietly 'came out'.

It was not until the 1970's that the gay liberation movement exploded onto the scene in Australia with the first Melbourne Gay Pride Week organised in 1973. It was also intended that it would say to gay and straight alike: gay is good, gay is proud, gay is aggressively fighting for liberation. It would say to gays: come out and stand up. Only you can win your own liberation. Come out of the ghettos, the bars and beats, from your closets in suburbia and in your own minds and join the struggle for your own liberation.

The centrepiece of the week was a picnic in the Botanical Gardens, attended by 150 lesbians and gay men. Rennie Ellis reported in the Nation Review that the public response to the picnic was one of 'good humour at least and an easy going acceptance at best'. The 'infectious charm' of the picnickers, their very gay songs, hand-in-hand promenading, games of Drop the Hanky and Spin the Bottle amused the passers-by until a policeman appeared and announced that games were not permitted in the park. Faced with the obvious riposte – that children all over were playing games – he announced that he would decide what was a game and what was not. 'I'm game if you're game' a voice from somewhere in the crowd murmured. Feisty radical lesbians continued to argue, threats of arrest were uttered. 'I'm not playing around anymore' he declared straight-faced, and the crowd duly settled down to polish off their turkey. One spectator was heard to remark that he had no idea that there were so many homosexuals in Melbourne. And which was after all, the point of the week's events.

But the moment that most people remember, even decades later, was the arrival of Gordon Doak at the demo in the City Square. Gordon was by then 42 (ancient by Gay Lib's standards), a building contractor who lived in the Western suburbs. A big man [6'1", 14 stone], comfortable with his homosexuality but not very out. He decided, on hearing about the demo, that he wanted to be there. But not for him anything as mundane as catching a train. Rather he decided to run in to the city, and to carry a banner that he made for himself – 2 foot square, black letters on green canvas that read '*I am proud of my homosexuality. Please change the repression against homosexuals and let us live in peace*'. As he ran the eight miles through the streets of Sunshine, Tottenham and Footscray, he was cheered on and waved at by pedestrians and jeered at only twice! As one of those at the demo pointed out 'Everyone hoped that there would be a Gordon Doak, of course, because one of Gay Pride Week's objectives was to get members of the community to "come out"'. But no-one, not even the Gay Liberation organisers, expected it to happen with such a dramatic flourish. The fact that it did illustrated with startling clarity the success of the week'. And, we might add, prefigured the success of the movement.¹

1 <http://www3.slv.vic.gov.au/latrobejournal/issue/latrobe-87/t1-g-t8.html#latrobe-87-092b>



The famous 1973 photo of Gordon that was published in the daily newspapers of the time

For many years, Gordon had lived in a two story home that he had single handedly built next door to his parents in Sunshine, with Jim Gaylor supplying a lot of the building materials, and he had run an after-hours gymnasium there. Soon after his 1973 'coming out', he sold up and purchased a property in Moor St, Fitzroy, digging underground and setting up his own personal gym under the house for himself and his friends, including Jim.

By the mid 1970s, much of the youthful energy that initially drove gay liberation activism in Australia was beginning to wane. When Melbourne Gay Liberation could no longer afford to rent its Brunswick Street centre, Gordon stepped into the breach, enabling the phone service to live in his house and hosting a weekly drop-in night, which morphed into Gay Rap when Gay Liberation's phone service wound up in 1978. While Thursday night was open house to gay people, Wednesday nights were open to neighbours who were invited in for a dinner cooked by Gordon.²

The welcoming atmosphere of Gay Rap at Gordon's place drew a diverse and appreciative crowd. Thursday nights were supplemented by outdoor activities that Gordon organised, including bushwalking trips and picnics.

Like Jim, Gordon loved walking and exercising and, every day, he walked and trained in his gym. Sadly, in later life, while on one of his night walks in the 1980's, he was set upon by a gang of young men, simply because he was 'gay', but he eventually recovered from the bashing.

I am pleased to record that eventually he found his long term partner Alan, an optometrist, and they lived together for 35 years until Gordon's death last month. He, Alan and their friends were also going on some camp or other in the wilderness or to places like Cradle Mountain in Tasmania. He was instantly recognisable with his red woollen beanie that he wore everywhere.

² Much of the information about Gordon's post-1973 activities in this period have been gleaned from the obituary, written by Gary Jaynes and published in the Melbourne Age newspaper on Saturday 16 May 2015. This obituary is part of a fuller obituary written by Gary for the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives.



Gordon enjoyed the outdoors, but always with his distinctive red beanie

He remained in good health and fit mentally until about 3 years ago when he had to have a knee replacement. Then, perhaps coincidentally, dementia set in and he had to be looked after. In that context, his passing last month was probably a relief to those who still cared for him.

As his health failed in those last few years, he was restricted to his home but would not use a walking stick or a walking frame – he would only use a striped (rainbow) pole to give him support as he moved around. A final statement perhaps?

He had confided to his sister in later years that he didn't want a fancy indoor funeral service or a fancy coffin but wanted an outdoor graveside service and the plainest of caskets. So that's what he got – his coffin was of plain unvarnished pine, with rope handles. He was buried along with his rainbow walking stick and his distinctive red beanie.

So another of our old walkers has passed on. And like all the old veterans, Gordon had his own unique story to tell. I am privileged to be able to pass it onto our younger club members. Thank goodness that we live now in a more tolerant society that can accept people as they are.

Tim Erickson
Sunday 10 May 2015

By way of addendum, in 2019, the City of Melbourne Council installed the historic 1973 photo of Gordon in the “Yes” room in the Melbourne Town Hall. This photo acknowledges his historic role in campaigning for LGBTI acceptance.