

## HAROLD ('HAPPY') ROCHE – A CLUB MEMBER OF THE 1930'S

Harry Roche was a member of St Joseph's Athletics Club in Melbourne and a member of the Victorian Amateur Walking Club. St Joseph's was a prestigious club in the 1930's and boasted a strong walking team which included Joe O'Farrell, Frank Scully and Harry.

Racewalking was a small sport in those days and most regular Melbourne based competitors had nicknames. Harry was known as 'Happy' Roche.

The first mention of 'Happy' is not in a walking result but in a photo taken in October 1931. The photo shows a very young 'Happy' marking the finish line as Jim Gaylor wins the 1931 Victorian 50 Mile Championship at the Melbourne Showgrounds.



**Jim Gaylor wins the 1931 50 Mile Championship. The people from the left are: George Barthell, Frank Scully, Joe Mulcahy, 'Happy' Roach, Jim Gaylor and George Knott.**

The first walking mention I can find in our records has Harry winning a 1931-32 summer Season Interclub 1mile walk by 100 yards in a time of 7 mins 36 secs. This was quite a good time for someone starting out in the sport.

He then joined the Victorian Amateur Walkers Club and started to walk with that club as well as meeting his Interclub commitments. His first recorded VAWC walk was a 1 Mile Handicap, held at the Malvern Cricket Ground on Tuesday 9 February 1932. He won by 3 inches with 5 yards between second and third, off a handicap start of 55 secs. His time was an improving 7:17. Fastest time was Jack Cummins off scratch – Jack recorded a time of 6:40.

A few months later he had a second club win in a VAWC 3 Mile Handicap walk on Saturday 14 May 1932. Taking the lead towards the end of the second mile and off a handicap of 2 mins 30 secs, Harry won the walk along Alexandra Avenue. This was the opening walk of the 1932 Winter Season. He won by 50 yards from Jim Gaylor with a winning time of 24 mins 28 secs. Gaylor recorded the fastest time of the day with 24:02.

The longest event he contested that winter was the VAWC 7 Mile Relay on 17 September 1932 in which his team finished second.

In 1933, he had only 1 win, in the VAWC 5 Mile handicap event, held at Ascot Racecourse on Saturday 1 August. He was off a handicap of 7 mins and won by 25 yards with a time of 41:02, a big improvement on his 1932 performances. The fastest time of the day was that of Jack Cummins with 38:51.

In 1934, he started the year well with a 1 Mile Handicap win on 9 January. The venue was the Malverren Cricket Ground and the course was later found to be 100 yards too long. Off a mark of 1:00, he won by 5 yards with a time of 8:08 for the mile. Fastest time was 7:35 by Bill Marston. The only other placing I can find in that year was in a 5 mile handicap race at Albert Park on Saturday 11 August. His time was 41:50 and he was off a handicap start time of 6:30. But if you have a 6 Mile trophy dating from 1934, then he must have won over that distance as well.

In 1935, he seemed to walk more regularly and attacked the longer distance walks. On 25 May, he won the VAWC 5 Mile Handicap by 30 yards off a handicap of 4:50 with a time of 42:07. Fastest time of 39:22 was by Jack Cummins. He also walked in the VAWC 15 Mile event on 17 August, coming 8<sup>th</sup> in 2:16:10. In that particular race, Jack Cummins established a new Victorian record of 2:02:25 in winning the event. Two weeks later on 31 August, he finished 11<sup>th</sup> in a VAWC 20 Mile event in a time of 3:25:25. Jack Cummins, off scratch, won an a wonderful time of 2:53:20.

With this preparation behind him, Harry contested the VAWC 50 Km Championship, finishing 6<sup>th</sup> in a time of 5:53:27. It was discovered after the race that C. Dunning had not completed the course.

He was obviously also an accomplished runner as the following brief snippet shows

*“In the 1935 YMCA relay, the improvement of the YMCA team was due to Harry who did the fastest time up the hill.”*

In 1936, Harry finally medalled in a Victorian State championship, the Victorian 50 km title. A brief cutting of the time states:

*“At the start, H. Roche, who finished 3<sup>rd</sup>, led from O’Farrell, Gaylor and Tunaley, with Cummins further back. Gaylor covered the 5 miles in 43 mins. After 10 miles, Gaylor had fallen back and O’Farrell had taken his place, with Cummins next. Roche was nearly ¾ of a mile back with Theobald pressing him. Roche gained his third place by only 15 yards.”*

<i>Cummins, Jack</i>	<i>4.57.34</i>
<i>O’Farrell, Joseph</i>	<i>4.58.19</i>
<i>Roche, Harry</i>	<i>5.07.20</i>

He was then selected to represent Victoria and finished 6<sup>th</sup> in the 1936 Australian 50 km walk in 5:31:43. The event was won by Jack Cummins in 5:19. This was probably the highlight of his career thus far.

He also improved his 20 mile time to 2:59:44 in coming 9<sup>th</sup> in yet another VAWC event.

1936 certainly seems to have been his biggest and most successful year to day. That makes it hard to understand why he then disappears and does not reappear in our archives until the winter season of 1939 – I can only assume that for one reason or another, he had a few years away from the sport. In any case, his return to the sport was short lived as War was declared and the club went into voluntary recession in 1941. Many of its members were already serving in the Armed Forces.

A 1961 Heel and Toe magazine, when discussing club secretary Norm Goble and his war experiences, states the following

*He initially served as a Captain in the Second Fifth Batallion (and he was Sports Officer as well) and he fought in the Middle East, Syria, Palestine (where he finished 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Palestinian 3000m championship), Ceylon, New Guinea and Darwin, where he commanded the Fifth Batallion in 1943-44. Norm returned home in 1945 as a Lieutenant-Colonel – a tribute to his ability to handle and organise men. One of Norm’s most vivid war memories was the 55 mile hike in the tropics which he and ‘Happy’ Roach (another club member) tackled ‘just for fun’. Happy lasted 36 miles but Norm battled through (with haversack, 38 revolver, military boots, etc) in just over 14½ hours.*

Harry does not seem to reappear in our records until the 1949 winter season when he is seen once again as a regular competitor. He was one of the many walkers who had returned to the club and hailed from the earlier pre-war era. Most were now in their late thirties or early forties. His best walk in this post-war period was on October 15 1949 when he finished second in the VAWC 50 mile championship which was from St Kilda to Frankston and return.

1. McKinna, William	9:21:12
2. Roche Harry	9:28:31
3. Goble, Norman	9:39:01
4. O’Farrell, Joseph	9:58:55
5. Gaylor, James	10:04:56

All 5 finishers were in this category and all had raced with the club in the early 1930’s as young men.

The following article from the club magazine of 1934 is a nice one and mentions Harry in a couple of places.

**Heel & Toe Club Magazine, October 1934**  
**LOOKING 'EM OVER AT ABERT PARK.**  
**By "Arveebie"**

*It is a nice bright afternoon,, and when the Hon. Sec., having duly marked out the course, arrives at the dressing room, he discovers some fourteen enthusiasts anxious for the ten miler. The time to start quickly comes and competitors leave for the starting point accompanied by the whole of the two Officials present. Crossing the lawn close to the start, the boys notice a last minute dash being made by that well-known competitor Tubby Stafford who is not more than about half an hour late.*

*They're off! Bubbles Blakey beats the gun but getting lost somewhere near the Chalet in the first mile, does not maintain his advantage. Harry Wright forces the pace early only to find that blisters will come despite the use of two pairs of shoes. Happy Roche opens out, on the long mile stretch and shown glimpses of previous form. However, the shock of able to take the lead proves too much for him - he swallows a lemon and joins the time-keeper.*

*Joe O'Farrell is out for training only and doesn't use the oilcan on his legs until six miles have been covered and the timekeeper has roared him up for lagging.*

*Jack Larkin joins the onlookers and orders some of the old hands to do a special lap extra. He likes to see them stop and start like his baby car. Alex Philpotts, after covering three miles, is attracted by a few of the local beauties, so, donning a silk singlet, shows them some lifelike poses on the footpath.. Squatter Grierson mistakes the distance - thinks it is a hundred miler instead of a ten and walking briskly across the finishing lines, says - "I ought to go well in the 50 Kilos."*

*Freddy O'Grady finds a ten a long way, but says he'll start serious training again next Spring. Ian MDougall goes well until burnt off by Happy but Juniors Tubby Staf and Keith Mac go so fast that they am hardly seen until it is found they have annexed 1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> places. Lindsay Guy is noticed doing a quiet bit of prospecting on route. He almost faints when he hears the time keeper has clocked him for 4 miles - he has walked twice as far as he intended!*

*Jack Cummins has such a lonely walk by himself in the twilight that he now regrets he has taught some of the lads to move so fast. Bill Tunaley also is lonely without his Magpie pals but goes fast and completes the course an usual. Arch Wilson is another to go well early but leg trouble is his downfall. Heigh-ho, an interesting afternoon and we rush to hear the last of the football broadcast.*

Finally, how do I summarise Harry's career. He was not a champion walker – that sort of tag is reserved for those like Jack Cummins who regularly won from scratch and set the standards to which others aspired. Harry was rather one of those solid clubmen who enjoyed their walking and who was a mid field finisher for most of his career. But he won his fair share of events and obviously treasured his wins enough to keep his trophies. That is good!

We are not so much measured by our successes but by our attitude to life and to our families and others. The fact that Harry was known as 'Happy' indicates something of the type of walker he was and how he is remembered in the club archives.

Tim

July 2004

**Written for his daughter Mary Boshell**