

JACK LEWIS – VICTORIAN WALKING LEGEND

There had been very few formal opportunities for walkers to attempt truly long distances in the early years of the twentieth century. Jim McDonald's 50 mile walks in 1896 and 1904 stood alone as the only two on record and McDonald's 1904 time of 9:43:02 stood as the Australasian record.

When the N.S.W. Amateur Athletic Association and the N.S.W. Walking and Field Games Club pooled their resources to host a Fifty Miles Amateur Road Walking Championship in September 1926 in Sydney, it was the first race longer than 25 miles since 1904. Both Victoria and NSW had for some years held their own respective 25 Mile Walk championships but this was twice that distance and a daunting prospect for the walkers of the period.

The entry list of 26 walkers included the cream of Australia and amongst them was Victorian Jack Lewis. Lewis was a Warburton based forest ranger, a former Victorian 25 Mile champion (1922) and a former Victorian marathon champion. He was known as 'the Grecian marathon runner' and, in fact, showed Greece as this country of representation in his various races.



Jack Lewis, the famous Victorian walker, as represented in caricature

A newspaper of the time described him as follows

“He is a fine type of athlete, bronzed like a statue. He lives a healthy life in the Warburton district where he is one of the local rangers. Walking to him is a pleasure and 50 miles in the mountains is regarded as nothing more than part of his daily exercise. In the pre-war days, as a mere lad, he made a name for himself as a Marathon runner. Since then he has developed into an endurance athlete.”

Lewis did not disappoint his Victorian backers, finishing first, ahead of NSW walker Gordon Smith and easily beating McDonald's 50 mile time with **9:20:24**.

His record time did not last very long – in the very next edition of the NSW event the following year, Gordon Smith improved to win in a new best time of **9:17:32**. This was the first of a string of 50 mile wins for Smith, culminating in his successful 100 mile walks in 1937 and 1938. There were 11 starters of whom 10 were from NSW.

The Victorians now felt the need to schedule their own long distance walks and, when the Victorian Amateur Walkers' Club drew up its winter racing fixture for 1928, two new events were included on the program – a 50 Mile roadwalk from Melbourne to Frankston and Return on 25 August and a 24 Hour Test event at the Amateur Sports Ground in Melbourne on 8 September.

As it turned out, the scheduling of 2 such events proved overly optimistic and the calendar was eventually amended to show one ultra distance walking event for the year, a 10 Hour Race at the Motor Dome. This led to the following press release in Queensland where there was at least one disappointed walker!

Tom Byrnes, the Queensland endurance athlete, is down in the dumps. He intended to compete in the Victorian 12 hours' endurance event for walkers. Now 'tis said that the event may not be held. Byrnes is a regular competitor in such events and thinks nothing of journeying 1000 miles or so to take part. There was some talk originally of a 24-hours' test and this event interested Byrnes most. "Twenty five miles would be no test at all," he writes. "It is a mere sprint, and one hardly gets warmed up. But in regard to a 24 hours' test I would willingly walk to Melbourne for the privilege to taking part."

Byrne is well over 40 years of age, is more than 6 feet tall and weights 12.0 in hard condition. Tom and his friend Harold Parcell, a former marathon champion, train all the year round, and go on long jaunts together. On returning from a 20-mile walk, they don the gloves and set to for a few rounds. Parcell, Byrnes informs me, boxes very well.

So, after a break of 24 years, Victoria finally scheduled a long distance walk, over a compromise 10 hours. The venue was the Melbourne 'Motor Drome'. This was a sloping concrete track used for cycling and other sports that had been erected around the outside of the Olympic Park grass track in the 1920's. Lewis, the favourite, started slowly but came home strongly through the field to easily win with a distance of 53 miles 350 yards. His 50 mile time of **9:24:04** was a new Victorian best, some 18 minutes better than Jimmy McDonald's 1904 time. However, the motor drome was not regarded as a proper track so McDonald's Victorian Track Record stood.

The press reported as follows on the second half of the race

Pretty, in third place, was only 50 yards behind Cavell and had created the greatest surprise of the day, for previous to this event, he had restricted his activities to short distance events. In the next 2 hours, Lewis covered a little less than 10 miles. Pretty began to accelerate and passed Cavell. At 40 miles, Lewis had been walking for 7h 25mins and had 112mins in which to break G Smith's Australian record for 50 miles. It meant cutting off a full minute from his average time per mile at this stage and, although he quickened and beat Smith's time for the event of this year by 13 secs, he failed to beat the record by 6 mins. However, the effort seemed to freshen him for in his last 5 miles, the times became faster as he went on. His times for the last 5 miles were 11.50, 11.49, 11.44, 11.08 and 10.55.



Jack Pretty leads Jack Lewis in the 1928 Victorian 50 Mile Championship

The next year, the Victorian Amateur Walkers' Club committee, although acknowledging the success of the 10 Hour walk, decided to revert to their original plan and scheduled a 50 mile event from St Kilda to Frankston and Return. This was the first of a number of 50 Mile walk events held in Victoria, alongside the NSW ones and Jack Lewis continued his dominance with convincing wins in both 1929 and 1930. His 1929 winning time was **9:24:31** and he won by 28 minutes.

The 1930 event was even faster. Although Lewis was the obvious favourite, Ted Winstanley was considered by many as a serious threat. He was a proven distance walker who had taken a surprise 2nd place in the 1923 Victorian 25 Mile Championship as a 19 year old novice walker (with a time of 4:25:27). Since then, he had gone on to win the 1925 and 1926 Victorian 25 Mile titles. Marrying in 1926, he had retired from walking and had only returned to racing early in 1930 and had done well enough to win the Victorian 50 km title that year. At 6.45 am, the signal was given and the 7 contestants set out from the south gate of St Kilda Town Hall. Lewis stood out, dressed in black knickers and a white woolen sweater which showed his admirable physique to good effect. As the title holder, he was the centre of attention. Winstanley surged through

the 25 mile turn-around in a very fast time of 4:22:10 and was leading by about 150 yards from Robinson who was about 400 yards ahead of Lewis. Alas, he soon tired, Robinson retired and Lewis came over the top and won by nearly 10 minutes. But there was no doubting that it was Winstanley's game efforts that had led to the new record.

With his time of **8:58:07**, Lewis became the first Australasian walker to beat the 9 hour mark and his performance set new road standards for all distances and marks from 32 miles onwards.

"I thought that I would win today," Lewis said after his finished his long walk. The record breaker said that he regarded Winstanley and Robinson as his most dangerous opponents, but that all the same he was content to play a waiting game, as he had set himself a schedule to break the record for the course which he established last year. Lewis said that he was very surprised, however, to find that he had also broken the Australasian record for the distance. He paid a tribute to his opponents for their sportsmanship along the road. He was sorry that Wilson, the South Australian, had been forced to retire but said that, in his opinion, Wilson made too much use of his arms for long-distance walking, thus unnecessarily tiring himself. The winner had only a short preparation for today's big test, but during the last few days has regularly walked 50 or more miles each day around the hills at Warburton, where he is employed as a forest ranger. "If people walked more, even if only for pleasure, they would be far healthier and have less doctors' bills to pay," Lewis said with a smile.

Lewis's last big walk took place a year later in October 1931. The annual Victorian 50 Mile Walk championship had been scheduled on the Melbourne Showgrounds track to allow him to attack his various State records. Winstanley was also in the field and expected to provide stiff opposition. No one gave much credence to young Jim Gaylor who had been talked into participating simply to help Lewis in the early stages of the event. But it was Gaylor who took the lead at the 9 mile mark, held off several strong challenges by Winstanley and eventually won, setting new Victorian records for all distances from 15 miles to 50 miles. As usual, Lewis came through the field in the second half but the gap to Gaylor was just too big to bridge. Gaylor's time was 8:49:33 and Lewis's time in second place was **9:01:55**.

This ended Lewis's racing career. He had never specifically trained as a walker and simply relied on his endurance base, built up from his years as a ranger. It was now time for a new generation of walkers to take over the mantle. He retired while still a champion and returned to his beloved Warburton forest. His job was open ended – spotting and fighting bush fires, finding lost hikers, helping those in difficulties, maintaining the various hiking huts or simply walking the length and breadth of the mountains. This area is now known as the Yarra Ranges National Park and amongst the sites along the Cumberland Walk is a particularly large Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) planted by him in the 1940s.



Jack Lewis in 1933

He was responsible in later years for many articles and I am lucky enough to have one which he wrote in the Melbourne Herald in 1933. Some quotes from this article go a long way towards profiling this unique figure and his rough outdoors life.

In the summer months, I carry a ground sheet with me when I set out on the track. This is usually ample. But in winter, I like a blanket as well for we get it cold up in the ranges – and wet too, at times! But my pack never weighs

more than 45lb., which is a big enough load for a long day's tramp over rough country. And in my pack you will always find such valuable things as iodine, ointment, bandages and needle and some surgical thread.

One never knows what may happen in the way of mishaps, and out there amid the thick bush, one seems very far from medical aid. A slip on a slippery log or in a bog may mean trouble. At the present moment I have one stitch in my wrist from a cut and on several occasions, I have had to stitch wounds when I have been many miles from the nearest doctor. Lonely? Yes, it is, but that is part of the charm of a ranger's life, which he would never adopt if he did not know and love the forests and the solitude of the wild country.

Food, of course, is an important problem on these forest patrols, and one has to make sure of it. Actually I have food supplies stored in many hollow logs throughout the bush – logs which I can find again easily enough, though they might evade the man who is a stranger to the bush. And when I am setting out on a long trip that may necessitate recourse to “iron rations,” I carry such food as boiled wheat and dried fruit which are sustaining and filling.

The ranger needs nothing elaborate in the way of shelter or comfort – bivouacking, so to speak, becomes second nature. Dry grass makes a good bed for a tired man after a day in the forests, and when the bad weather blows up, as it will sometimes, the hollow inside of some dead tree that is still standing gives you adequate protection. In cold weather I light a fire several feet away from a rock, and sleep in the space between – and that is a good tip for the novice, for the heat of the fire warms up the rock – and so I am kept warm on both sides, however chilly the wind that roars through the trees overhead.

The bark from a fallen forest plant makes a good roof too, when half peeled off, and in this simple shelter, I can sleep as snugly as people in their comfortable beds far off in the big noisy cities. By the way, I wear the same quantity of clothing in winter and summer and never catch cold.

There is no need for an alarm clock either; indeed, I carry no watch, but just sleep from twilight to daylight, and then up again ready to resume the patrol, when the birds and bush life are waking. And that very early morning in the bush is a wonderful time of the day.

Sometimes people will ask whether I ever get lost in the bush. Well, a city man in the big timber can easily lose his bearings; whereas I can easily lose mine in the city! I say to myself, “If you don't come out today, you will come out tomorrow – and if you never come out, you will die amongst your friends, the trees. Fear only helps danger and the fatalities caused by both snake-bite and being lost in the bush can be reduced by courage.

An unlikely walking champion, Jack Lewis nevertheless stands as one of the great figures in Australian ultra distance walking in the 1920's. He has left an indelible footprint that we can still trace after all these years.