

JAMES (JIMMY) McDONALD – AUSTRALIA’S FIRST ULTRA DISTANCE WALKER

Jimmy McDonald has a unique place in Australian racewalking history – he bears the title of our first ultra-distance walker of note.



This photo was taken at Mt Martha in 1907 and is from the archives of the Melbourne Walking and Touring Club. It shows J McDonald, A.I.Green and W.E. Briggs.

Born in Auckland in 1867, Jimmy McDonald learned rowing in New Zealand and achieved some success with the Ponsonby Rowing Club, Auckland. Once he moved to Australia, he joined the Yarra Yarra club about 1890. He was included in the club’s crew that won the Victorian champion eights of 1891-92-93. During this period, the club was one of the most formidable eights ever brought together in Australia.

During his rowing career, he started in 23 races for 18 wins, 3 seconds and a third. Only once did he finish out of a place.

A versatile athlete and blessed with almost unlimited stamina, he turned his attention to pedestrianism in 1892, joining Hawthorn Harriers and becoming a foundation member of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club.

As a member of Hawthorn Harriers, he was a runner and walker and soon gained State honors as a member of Victoria’s winning team in a five mile cross country championship in Sydney.

His walking was mainly restricted to touring walks with the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club but on April 21, 1896, the club put on a 50 mile ultra distance walk in the Sydney Road. This was in fact recognised by V.A.A.A as a Victorian roadwalking championship, the first road championship recorded. (Victorian Track and Field Titles had been held since 1892 but these featured only 1 Mile and a 3 Mile Track Walks.)

Jimmy was one of a number of walking enthusiasts from the Walking and Touring Club who decided to give it a go and he was an easy winner, establishing an Australasian record of 10 hrs 9 mins 40 sec.

1. McDonald, James	10:09:40	Australasian Best
2. Ashworth, H P	10:38:00	
3. Miller, W	10:58:00	
4. Haines, F	11:08:00	

Jimmy must at some stage have decided to try his hand seriously at the shorter distances as records show him featuring in 1899 and 1901 in Victorian 1 mile and 3 mile track walk championship results. In 1899, he was 3rd in the 1 mile walk and was disqualified in the 3 mile walk. In 1901, he was 3rd in both the walks.

But his athletic endeavours continued to be geared towards long touring walks and his 50 mile walk result remained, for the time, his one outstanding walking endeavour.

It was on April 9, 1904 on a 400m grass track on the Scotch College cricket ground that a second Victorian 50 mile walk championship was held and he lined up once more as a starter. Reports of the time state that he had a 7 minute refreshment break at the 25 mile mark, and that he was the only finisher. In this event, his intermediate distances for 15 miles upwards were also recognised as Victorian State records and his 50 mile time was some 27 minutes faster than 1896.

1. McDonald, James

09:42:02

Victorian State Record, Australasian Record

Amazingly, given the interest in long distance walking overseas, no further similar races were held for 24 years and thus his 50mile record stood uncontested during that whole intervening period.

His interest in the sports of rowing and walking never waned but as time went on, walkers saw more of him as an official than did the oarsmen. When the Victorian Amateur Walking Club was formed in 1921, he immediately joined as an official and was, for many years, one of the Vice Presidents of the club.

The following article was published in the Melbourne papers in 1939

With an athletic background as former State title winner in walking and rowing events, Mr James McDonald, at 72, will again take up his post as chief judge for the Victorian Walking club when its 1939-40 season starts next month.

The older generation of walking enthusiasts will tell you that "Jimmy Mac" has held this position for nearly 30 years.

To see the way he swings along today – as smartly as a man 10 years his junior – is to doubt that he was born on May 12, 1867.

A native of Auckland, he had his first rowing success there with the Ponsonby Rowing Club in 1887, winning three events, including a maiden whale-boat race (five-oared craft).

Joining the Yarra Yarra Rowing Club here in the early 90's, he rowed bow in their Victorian Championships eight of 1891-93. This remarkable crew, undefeated for those three seasons, was stroked by E.A. Ainslie and included noted oarsmen in Chalmley and the Horsburgh brothers.

Mr McDonald's Victorian rowing record – 18 firsts, three seconds, once third and once unplaced in 23 starts – is exceptionally good. Maintaining his interest in the sport, he is today a vice-president of Yarra Yarra, and donor of trophies for an annual club four-oared race. He is a frequent weekend onlooker at the river.

Seven of the Victorian walking records established by him 35 years ago still stand.

The times were set on April 9, 1904, on the old Scotch College cricket ground, when he put up an Australasian 50 mile record of 9 hr 42min 2sec. This has since been lowered but intermediate performances of that day which still stand as records are: 15 miles 2hrs 30min 14sec; 20 miles 3hr 24min 59 sec; 25 miles 4hr 25min 45sec; 30 miles 5hr 32min 32sec; 35 miles 6 hr 31min 46sec; 40 miles 7 hr 34min 13sec; 45 miles 8 hr 40min 16sec.

It is reasonable to suppose that he could have improved on these times had he made a separate record attack on each distance. But the performances are all the more remarkable for having been done in the course of a 50 mile attempt.

Mr McDonald, who is a foundation member of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club, recalls 1892 as the start of his competitive walking career. His early experience of the sport was with the Hawthorn Harriers and he soon gained State honors as a member of Victoria's winning team in a five mile cross-country championship in Sydney.