

## JIM GAYLOR – A FORTUNATE LIFE

Jim Gaylor was born on 19 Sept 1910 and declared an orphan Ward of State at 5 weeks of age. He became one of 4 children adopted by a Newmarket widow, Bridget Gaylor. One of his new sisters was Edna who became the mother of Footscray footballer Ted Whitten snr.

The family living was tough and Jim slept on an open verandah with full exposure to the elements. He had to leave school at 14 and found work in a brass foundry, the first of many jobs. In 1926, enthusiastic about fitness and endurance, he began body building and joined the Collingwood Harriers. He was immediately successful and earned his first interstate trip in 1927 when he represented Victoria in the annual Glover Shield 7 mile walk. In the same junior competition but representing NSW was an equally young Tom Daintry.

For a young walker from a disadvantaged background, an interstate trip was an especially exciting experience. The manager of the Victorian team was Ted Drayton (also a VRWC life member) and the story goes that Ted gave Jim a brandy to help him sleep on the overnight train trip to Sydney. This had the opposite effect on him and he then spent the rest of the night roaming up and down the train. That was Jim's only intoxicating drink – he remained a tee totaller for the rest of his life!

Jim left home as soon as he could and made his home wherever he could – in old tin sheds or under a sugar bag at Victoria Park, the home of the Collingwood Football Club. He wanted to look after himself and did not want to be beholden to anyone. Times were tough as Melbourne was in the grip of the Depression and Jim took work where and when he could find it.



**Jim on the right with lifelong friend and fellow competitor Alan Reid – 1927.**

His first really major success was in the VRWC 50 mile championship at the Showgrounds in October 1931. The event had been put on the track to allow Jack Lewis to attack his various State records and Jim had been talked into participating simply to help Jack. But it was Jim who won the event and set new Victorian records for all distances from 15 miles to 50 miles. His 50 mile time of 8:49:33 beat the Lewis's State record by a massive 32 mins.



**‘Happy’ Roach reads the time as Jim Gaylor crosses the 50 Mile finish line in a new Australian record. A young George Knott looks on.**

The newspaper cutting for that event sums Jim up nicely

Behind the record-smashing fifty mile walk of Jim Gaylor, of the Collingwood Harriers, in the Victorian Walkers' Club championship at the Showgrounds on Saturday, is a remarkable story of grit and perseverance of a true Australian in the battle of life.

The casual person, picking up a newspaper and reading of Gaylor's record-breaking walk, naturally assumes that he is a great athlete who enjoys the best of training facilities, regular hours of sleep and regular food. Only his immediate friends and a few walking enthusiasts know that he is having an uphill struggle against heavy odds.

Gaylor, who is aged 21, has been out of regular work for a long time. But he is not an idler. He has a 3cwt truck that he pushes all around Melbourne and suburbs, hopeful that somebody will employ him to shift furniture or goods of any kind. It is an unremunerative occupation that yields him very little. He has a small room in North Richmond. Some weeks he does not earn enough with his truck to meet the rent but he makes it up somehow by other kinds of work.

When a man is down he accepts anything if he is a trier. Gaylor tries from daylight till dark – no hour is too late for him; no distance too far. Good friends give him odd jobs,. One is Mr Ted Drayton, a Sunshine potter. Gaylor has

often walked to Sunshine early in the morning for a job, worked there all day and then walked home. The one neat suit that he wears when not doing hard work was acquired from 'saved fares' – to use his own expression.

Gaylor refuses charity, but will go anywhere for work. He left home because he could not contribute to its support. At times, he has lived on sixpence a day. For three weeks, he existed on toast.

Lately however, he has been getting a better spin but he has no regular meals. He considers the enforced dieting has helped to harden him while the constant walking everywhere in search of employment, added to his own natural zeal for the sport, has helped to make him an extraordinarily talented walker as far as natural ability is concerned.

It has also made him hardy. Just how hardy was proved by his recent performance in the 50 km walk on the final day of the Show. On the Tuesday, he suffered from an attack of ptomaine poisoning and on the Wednesday was compelled to keep to his bed. On Thursday he got up and went for a 20 mile walk with the object of shaking the sickness off him. However, he was ill again on the Friday and was forced to take things quietly. Thought still very sick on the Saturday he walked in the race and finished third.

Frank McLure, his team mate and co-worker in odd jobs, said that Gaylor's performance in that race was a superhuman effort considering his condition.

Gaylor is not big but he is solid with the chest of a Sandow. Since he has been walking at the age of 16, he has put on over two stone in weight. Great breathing capacity is a big asset to him in walking.

While walking to victory in the 50 mile race on Saturday, Gaylor drank more than 20 cups of water. After each drink, he inhaled and exhaled air freely, thereby working up perspiration. He defies the recognised canons of athletics.

Mr. T Ready, a North Richmond chemist, said Gaylor possesses some rare electrical properties in his body. "This electricity keeps him on the move all the time" he added. "He seldom seems to want rest, yet is always as fit as a fiddle.

Gaylor never feels cold, though he wears only a shirt next to his skin. He could not stand a singlet on his body.

Gaylor thought that he would do the 50 miles of Saturday's race in 10½ hours. He worked on no particular schedule. "After the first few miles, I just let myself go flat out, and I never felt better" he stated.

The time occupied was 8 hours 49 minutes 33 seconds. He won by ¾ of a mile from the

celebrated long distance walker J. Lewis – a feat in itself that stamps the winner as an exceptional athlete.

In addition to winning the Victorian walking title, Gaylor broke all Victorian records from 15 to 50 miles, and his time for the 50 miles is the best ever recorded in Australia.

It was truly a wonderful performance for this plucky lad, on top of his hardships.

Until recently, he did not know what massage was, but Jim Cox, one of the Collingwood Harriers club's most ardent enthusiasts, took him in hand and has been attending to his legs. Gaylor intends to keep on walking, to create new records and to make good in life. He is worthy of every encouragement by athletic officials.

Gaylor may be destined to create world records. Regular employment, proper training and careful coaching may place him in the world's highest class of walkers.

Undoubtedly privation has been the means of making him a champion. He walks to live, as well as to conquer. It is related that on one occasion when he entered for a walking event in Oakleigh, a distant outer suburb of Melbourne, he walked there, competed in the race, and walked home again, covering nearly 20 miles more than the distance of the race.

While walking to victory and fame on Saturday, he whistled merrily for most of the harrowing journey. Evidently he has the heart of a lion.

He followed this with his first Senior State title in 1932 over 50 km. Tremendously strong, he was tireless and in his element over the 50 km and 50 mile distances. In that same year, he was second in the State 50 mile and the State 5 mile championships, thus showing his great versatility.

He had been expected to win the 1932 50 mile event which was held on a St Kilda to Frankston and Return course but on this occasion he was upset by Joe O'Farrell who was better known as a track walker. On his first serious excursion into the ultra distance area, Joe won in an Australian best time of 8:38, finishing 6 minutes ahead of Jim whose 8:44 was also a personal best time.

Unfortunately this was the last 50 mile event held in Victoria and Jim was deprived of any further opportunities to excel at this distance. The next such event was not held until 1947.

He went on to win further State 50 km titles in 1933 and in 1937, 1938 and 1939. But any thoughts of Olympic selection were dashed when Australia entered the Second World War and the 1940 Olympics were cancelled. War was announced the day after his 1939 Victorian 50 km title win, his fifth.

When the club was disbanded in 1941, Jim's walking career effectively ended. Enlisting in the Royal Australian Air Force in 1943, he was sent to Papua New Guinea as a member of the 420B unit. His specialties were sea rescues and dispatch carrying through the jungle. It was during one such jungle mission that he was confronted by a native carrying a spear. Alarmed, Jim saw that the spear was decorated with human teeth. "He jabbed the spear tip into my arm," Jim said. "But luckily he didn't have me for supper."

It was on a rescue mission in the Bismarck Sea, off the north-east coast of Papua New Guinea that a Japanese bullet struck him in the heart. He and fellow crewmembers were searching for injured airmen shot down in battle with the Japanese navy. Jim survived but his mate who sat beside him was killed. After several months of rehabilitation in a makeshift hospital under a thatched roof on the island of New Britain, Jim returned home to Sunshine to start up a cartage contracting business, still with pieces of shrapnel buried deep in his chest.

When VAWC reformed in 1946, he returned to walking and joined the Committee, subsequently competing in a number of Victorian 50mile championships, 50 km championships and Melbourne to Frankston races. He still

had his amazing physique but was now older and not up to his earlier form. In the 1947 50 Mile Championship from Melbourne to Frankston and Return, he was 2<sup>nd</sup> in 9:32, in 1949 he was 5<sup>th</sup> in 10:04 and on 3 other occasions he started but did not finish the event. But he was still a keen competitor and enjoyed the challenge of the longer distances.



**The start of the Victorian 50 km Championships, the Showgrounds, 1949. Jim is second from left. He still has his characteristic barrel chest and strong build. Winner Gus Theobold is fourth from the left.**

The Victorian 50 km event at that time started at the Royal Melbourne Showgrounds on the main arena, then proceeded along Ballarat Road to Rockbank before returning. It was held during the Royal Melbourne Show and the finish was in front of large crowds of appreciative spectators. Imagine that nowadays!



**Jim starts the 1950 Melbourne to Frankston Handicap event over 25 miles. John Busst is at right of picture, preparing to start next. Note the cyclist – for such races, each competitor was accompanied by a cyclist or car.**

He was eventually awarded life membership of VAWC in 1955 after nearly 30 years of club membership as both a competitor and a committee member. When the Alf Robinson Clubrooms were built in the late 50s, it was Jim who provided his truck and helped with much of the necessary cartage. Jim supplied the bricks that were used for the clubroom's superstructure.

Jim was rewarded for his many years of service to athletics in 1956 when he was an official at the Melbourne Olympics. From then on, his proudest possessions were his 1956 Olympic Badge and Officials blazer.

In his later years, he never forgot the club and regularly turned up for all AGMs and for special occasions. He was recognised as our longest serving member until his death in 1999.

In 1991, he and his daughter Sharon finally tracked down his natural mother and found she had died 32 years previously. She had lived along the route that the walkers used to take from Melbourne to Frankston so it was likely that she had unknowingly watched her son walk past her front fence on many occasions as he took the Nepean Road to Frankston. It was a bitter blow to Jim. The Herald Sun carried the story and the following picture on Mother's day in 1992.



**Melbourne Herald Sun, page 1, 11/05/1992. Jim Gaylor, 81, kneels at his mother's grave to say a prayer for Mother's Day.**

Jim had a unique claim in that he had survived lightning strikes on 3 separate occasions. The first time was as a 22 year old under a tree in North Richmond. Then after the war came two more close calls when he was out and about near his Sunshine home. Melbourne University scientists gave him a thorough examination and found him to be a very interesting human specimen indeed. There was even a newspaper report. "They tested my blood and bone measurements," Jim recalled. "I know it sounds amazing, but the scientists reckoned my heavy boned structure saved me from possible death."

He continued with his cartage business until his semi-retirement in 1981. But retirement from work for Jim simply gave him more time to his philanthropic activities. For years, he collected and distributed food to homeless derelicts, helped migrant families find their feet in a new land and generally lend a helping hand to the lonely, the frail and the elderly. He was the recipient of many Community awards but remained a humble man.

When he was confined to hospital in his last months, he had the window of his room permanently open regardless of the conditions. He was still as tough as old nails and still impervious to the cold even as an old man. Jim died on 27 Sept 1999 at 89 years of age.

Like the Western Australian battler Albert Facey, Jim could also have claimed that he had lived 'A Fortunate Life'. But it was a life of survival against the odds, one in which he battled time and time again and eventually

came out the better for his tough experiences. He found work all his life, brought up a family successfully, had a great career as a walker and was one of the cornerstones of the VAWC over many years.