

You might think you know Kevin Cassidy from meeting him or from racing against him at our VRWC races at Middle Park or at the various Masters meets around the traps. This article will let everyone know that there is a lot more to Kevin than you might have thought possible.

Let's start with the basics. Kevin was born on 13<sup>th</sup> August 1960, so is about to celebrate his 59<sup>th</sup> birthday. He has been racing with us at VRWC since January 2018 and has progressed steadily over that short timeframe. Now, as an M55 walker, he has PBs of 7:09 (1500m), 15:20 (3000m), 25:27 (5km), 52:37 (10km) and 1:47:34 (20km). He is also the current Victorian (1500m, 3000m and 10km) and Australian (5000m, 10km and 20km) Masters M55 walks champion.

As an aside here, Kevin had been intending to compete in his first World Masters Championships in Malaga, Spain, in September 2018 but had to pull the plug at the last minute after contracting a severe case of shingles. He was waylaid for some months and was not able to return to competition until his eyesight had returned sufficiently to to expose himself to the full sunshine of a bright Melbourne day. Luckily, he has now fully recovered, although his eyesight is still not 100%.



*Kevin in action at Middle Park in June 2018*

But what did Kevin do in the many years leading up to 2018. Did he come from a background of former sports? The answer a definite YES, in capital letters!

A student of Coburg High School, Kevin was a proud northern suburbs boy. In fact, my mother was Vice Principal of Coburg HS when Kevin was there and he remembers her with fondness. How's that for a connection!

He won the Combined Schools Sports track run for Coburg HS and decided to join Coburg Harriers in 1976, aged 16, focusing on 800m and 1500m. He spent the next 10 years honing his running skills. He also umpired (Australian Rules Football) from 1980 onwards and actually did two reserve games on the MCG.

He also reminds me that he even did a summer season of walking (1978/1979) when he was 18 years old, walking in Interclub and competing on a few occasions in the midweek VAWC club races at our old clubrooms at the northern end of Albert Park Lake.

In 1983, the ultra running scene exploded into the Australian media spotlight, compliments of the Sydney to Melbourne Westfield classic<sup>1</sup> and its inaugural winner Cliff Young.<sup>2</sup> One of the 1984 Westfield qualifying runs was held at the Coburg Shopping Centre and Kevin volunteered as one of the lapscorers. He was intrigued by this new discipline and keen to have a go himself.

After some months preparing with long training runs, his first ultra was in the 1985 100km Track Classic, put on by the Coburg Harriers at their track. Naturally, he completed the full distance. Thus began what was a long term love affair with one of the toughest sports of all.

*I spent 30 years of my life as a runner, 20 of them involved tackling Ultramarathon races both here and overseas before age and injury wore my body down.*

1 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney\\_to\\_Melbourne\\_Ultramarathon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sydney_to_Melbourne_Ultramarathon)

2 See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cliff\\_Young\\_\(athlete\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cliff_Young_(athlete))

Kevin's real love was the trail ultra and he competed with distinction in many tough overseas trail runs, mainly in America. He was also a pretty slick ultra track runner, with a 24 Hour track PB of 187km and with good times in the shorter track ultra distances of 50 Miles and 100km.



*Left: Kevin leads fellow ultraunner Klaus Schnibbe in the 1986 Sri Shinmoy 24 Hour Run in Adelaide  
Right: Kevin competing in the 1997 US 100 Miler in the Sierra Mountains in California*

Perhaps the one tick missing from his ultra list might have been a finish in the Sydney to Melbourne Westfield classic. Although the course sometimes varied, it was always around 1000km and participation required big money sponsorship, with support vans and staff sufficient to cover the 6-8 day event duration. Kevin gives a fascinating insight into this in the following article: <http://www.coolrunning.com.au/ultra/1991001.shtml>. He tried unsuccessfully in 1989 and was building up for another attempt in 1992 when the event was abruptly cancelled.

Kevin was a foundation member of AURA when it formed in 1985 and he quickly immersed himself in the new organisation, being one of its most enthusiastic contributors for many years. He was eventually awarded with AURA Life Membership in 2006, a fitting recognition for one of their hardest workers.

In 2000, Kevin took over as the race director of the Percy Cerutti Frankston to Portsea 55km race, Australia's oldest and quirkiest ultra. First held in 1973, it retraces the footsteps of the many famous athletes from the 50's and 60's who pounded the road to Portsea under Percy Cerutti's coaching. The award for finishing is a block of chocolate, yet the race manages to attract a strong field every year and has now been held 46 times. Check out Kevin's race advertisement for the 2009 edition to get a feel for the race: <http://www.coolrunning.com.au/forums/index.php?showtopic=13909>. 19 years later, he is still going strong as race director.

Kevin was also the editor of the quarterly AURA magazine *Ultramag* from 2000 to 2009. Under his editorship, this grew into a large and widely circulated magazine which I have always enjoyed reading. He was also a regular contributor to running mags such as *Run For Your Life*, reporting on the ultra running scene.

Kevin was known as a walking encyclopaedia on all things ultrarunning and was, whenever possible, our guest presenter at the Coburg 24 Hour Carnival. His knowledge of the runners and their feats never ceased to amaze.

But all things come to an end, especially after nearly 20 years in such a demanding sport as ultra running. Finally, somewhere around 2005, Kevin realised that his running days were finished.

Looking for a new challenge post running, Kevin decided to explore another side of ultra distance sport. He had always been a bit of a swimmer so took the first tentative steps out of the pool. He had competed in the 1998 *Point Lonsdale Swim* (1.8km) and had finished it. It was now time to build on that tentative start. Always at the back of his mind was the English Channel!

*My initial knowledge of the English Channel goes back to my teenage years when we would get oodles of media coverage about the great Des Renford's battles with the channel in the 70's. February 2003 was when I got to meet an English Channel swimmer in person (Paul McGuire) and peruse all his photos and memorabilia. Given that my running days seemed to be rapidly grinding to a halt and I was dabbling in the summer bay swims around Melbourne, it struck me instantly as a challenge I should undertake at some stage.*

By sheer chance, he linked up with the *Black Rock Icebergers*<sup>3</sup> (who boast five channel swimmers amongst them) and the metamorphosis was under way. Having only ever swum in heated pools (27C) and Port Phillip Bay during summer (21C) wrapped up in a wetsuit, his first challenge was to adapt to cold water.

The pursuit of long swimming events then took him all over Australia. Harbour Bridge to Manly, Perth to Rottnest, Townsville to Magnetic Island and the Lake Burley Griffin 9km all became regular favourites but the one thing they had in common was the warm water.....much warmer than the English Channel

On and on piled the body fat as he came to terms with the fact that he needed much more body insulation if he was to swim the English Channel.

*The fattening up process has been interesting to say the least. My best running was done at 65 kilograms and I was around 70 when the channel became a serious prospect. The best advice was that I would essentially need to get up to at least 84!! Make no bones about it, all the eating was fun until I stagnated at 81 kilograms some six weeks prior to my channel swim. This was where the fun stopped. Cramming in family sized pizzas followed by two litres of ice cream is not a pleasant feeling at all. Bloated is barely half a description. Regardless, I hit my 84 kilogram target with two weeks to go. Sadly, my favourite running shirts no longer fit and a pair of "fat jeans" that I bought a while back knowing I would grow into them have promptly been grown out of!!*

It was at this time that he was interviewed about his English Channel preparation – it makes for an interesting read – see <https://albysswimmersprofile.blogspot.com/2008/07/swimmers-profile-no-9-kevin-cassidy.html>.

And how did his 2009 Channel attempt go? The drama of his swim must be read to be fully appreciated. The days of waiting in Dover for favourable conditions, the wind that whipped up after 6 hours of swimming and turned the flat water into a big swell and finally being nearly to France when the tide turned, pushing him away from the coast and extending his crossing time to an exhausting 16 hours. But finish it he did. Rather than say any more, I urge you to read his wonderful race report at <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wv-kevin-cassidy-2009-channel-report.pdf>.

He was the 59<sup>th</sup> Australian to complete this most iconic of long distance swims.



*Photos from Kevin's successful English Channel Swim – Swimming, drinking and finally finished!*

Over the following years, Kevin has completed many more of the ultra swim classics.

In 2017, with his Manhattan Swim, he completed *The Triple Crown of Open Water Swimming*<sup>4</sup>, a marathon swimming challenge which consists of the following three historically important swims:

- English Channel - 21 miles between England and France.
- Catalina Channel - 20 miles between Santa Catalina Island and the California mainland.
- Swim Around Manhattan - 28.5 mile circumnavigation of Manhattan Island, New York City

He became the 16<sup>th</sup> and oldest Australian to complete this feat.

3 See <https://www.black-ice.com.au/>

4 See <https://db.marathonswimmers.org/triple-crown/>



Of all his swims, he regards his 2017 *Cook Strait Swim*<sup>5</sup>, which crosses the Cook Strait from New Zealand's South Island to the North Island, as his toughest.

*Cook Strait is 26km in a straight line...although I covered a lot more distance thanks to the strong tide. The main challenge at Cook Strait is that it's such a volatile body of water and the tides only offer a very short window of opportunity to reach the finish.*



*February 2017 – greased up and ready to swim the Cook Strait*

Here is his profile from the LongSwimsDB website<sup>6</sup>

Date	Swim	Route	Km	Age	Time/Place
2008 Feb 16	<a href="#">Rottnest Channel Swim</a>	Cottesloe Beach to Rottnest Island	19.7	47	08:14:15 (108/140)
2009 Feb 21	<a href="#">Rottnest Channel Swim</a>	Cottesloe Beach to Rottnest Island	19.7	48-49	09:09:06 (124/156)
2009 Aug 18	<a href="#">English Channel (CSPF)</a>	England to France	33.2	49	16:00:00
2011 Jul 31	<a href="#">Magnetic Island to Townsville</a>	Picnic Bay to Strand Beach	8	50-51	02:42:52 (35/60)
2012 Jul 29	<a href="#">Magnetic Island to Townsville</a>	Picnic Bay to Strand Beach	8	51-52	02:34:18 (42/64)
2013 May 19	<a href="#">South Head Roughwater</a>	Bondi Beach to Watson's Bay	10	52-53	03:10:00 (24/49)
2015 Aug 29	<a href="#">BLDSA Windermere</a>	Fellfoot to Waterhead	16.9	55	06:54:59 (9/17)
2016 Jul 31	<a href="#">Magnetic Island to Townsville</a>	Picnic Bay to Strand Beach	8	55-56	02:43:22 (19/38)
2016 Aug 29	<a href="#">Catalina Channel</a>	Catalina Island to Mainland	32.3	56	13:59:45
2017 Feb 20	<a href="#">Cook Strait</a>	South Island to North Island	23	56-57	09:07:34
2017 Aug 19	<a href="#">20 Bridges Manhattan Swim</a>	Manhattan circumnavigation (CCW)	45.9	57	07:43:25 (6/11)

He eventually retired from the LongSwim scene after his Manhattan swim in August 2017. Maintaining the required additional body weight was pushing up his cholesterol count and Kevin realised the possible long term health implications.

When you see the new lean and mean Kevin racewalking at Middle Park or on the track, it is hard to believe that only 2 years ago he was a much heavier ultra distance swimmer. What a difference a couple of years can make!

During this last 30 years of ultra distance running and swimming, Kevin has held down a full time job with the Melbourne Fire Brigade. He joined MFB in September 1988 and retired only last year, after finally earning his 30 Year Service Medal. During his time on the job, he spent time in just about every metropolitan fire station and fought some of Melbourne's biggest fires. In this context, he remembers battling the big 1990's fire at the Visyboard recycling plant in Coolaroo, an inferno which took 9 days to put out.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://cookstraitswim.org.nz/>

<sup>6</sup> See Kevin's long distance swim profile at <https://db.marathonswimmers.org/p/kevin-cassidy/>

<sup>7</sup> In recent years, we have seen more fires like that one, including a major 2010 incident at the same plant and more recent recycling depot fires in suburban Melbourne in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. Add in the current issue with flammable building cladding, and being a fireman is becoming an ever more dangerous job.

During his time with MFB, he was a regular competitor in the Police and Emergency Services Games. Every 5 years, he would embark on a brief training regime, whip himself into walking shape, and contest the track walk. And of course, he would normally win!

So what is next for this man of action? Now freed of the burden of full time work, perhaps it is time for another ultra challenge? All I will say is that, when I suggested the 50km racewalk or the 100 Mile ultra walk, he didn't say no immediately. Time will tell!

It's been great fun to put his brief profile together. Well done Kevin on feats that have the rest of us in awe.

Tim Erickson  
Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> July 2019