

VALE MARION PATTERSON: 1934-2018



I am sad to report that well known Athletics Victoria official Marion Patterson died last Wednesday 28th February 2018, aged 83 years.

Born in Melbourne on 27th December 1934, Marion dedicated her life to athletics after beginning her involvement in the sport as a competitive shot putter.

Inspired by the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Marion joined the Victorian Women's Amateur Athletics Association in the 1956/57 season, as a member of the Brunswick Athletics Club. The club recognised her unwavering service with a life membership in 1973. She served for eight years as vice president and was a delegate to the Victorian WAAA both for Brunswick and Yallourn Newborough.

In her early days, she was taken under the wing of Mabel Robinson, then President of VWAAA, and soon became a tireless worker for the women's association.

Her roles in club and state athletics were myriad – interclub committee; equipment steward at the old Poplar Road, Royal Park venue; timekeeper, field judge, chief judge and referee and cross country official.

Victorian and Australian cross-country champion, Lynne Williams AM recalls with much affection that: “*Marion seemed ever present throughout all my competitive running years, first in the VWAA then AV/AA. She really was a hard worker, and we were all scared to cross her!*”

Marion qualified as a coach in 1966 and mentored both athletes and other coaches from then on - in both the metropolitan area and on frequent visits to country centres.

Marion was one of those who was keen to bridge the then divide between women's and men's athletics and, when the men's and women's associations moved towards a single organization structure in the late 1970s, Marion was in the forefront – immediately becoming convenor of the Athletics Union of Australia Race Walking Committee where she produced the 1981 edition of the AAU of A *Rules of Walking and Judging Procedures* handbook.

At state level, she was an inaugural member of Athletics Victoria's Winter Committee in 1982 – an aspect of the sport for which she had a particular passion and to which Marion was dedicated until her passing. She served on the AV Board in this capacity.

In her later years, she took on much of the work in gathering results from and documenting the history of the Women's Association. Sadly much of this, along with her own personal possessions, were lost when her family home burnt down in later years.

In the mid seventies, Marion started to judge regularly at the Victorian Amateur Walkers' Club at Albert Park. She quickly worked her way up through the racewalking ranks, eventually earning the status of and IAAF Racewalk Judge. Bob Cruise commented:

I remember her taking on many roles on the track, including judging. She was an imposing figure. Her immaculate white skirt with the green jacket of Australia were always prominent. Ray Smith, Marion and I would occasionally comment that they only selected international judges from Brunswick and Coburg (The three of us lived in that area).

But her skills were recognised more broadly, and other opportunities at higher levels beckoned and were taken enthusiastically.

Her first international appointment as a technical official came in 1974 for the Commonwealth Games in Auckland. At major international events in Australia, her diverse skills and qualifications were displayed in her appointments - as a walk judge at the 1982 Commonwealth Games, a field events official at the 1985 World Cup and a call room judge at the 2001 IAAF Grand Prix Final in Melbourne. Overseas there were roles at two other Commonwealth Games and major IAAF competitions as a walk judge. Her last major international appointment was as a racewalk judge in the 1997 IAAF World Championships in Athens.

But technical officiating was not the only string to Marion's bow. She was a regular manager of Victorian women's teams to national cross country championships and other meets from 1973. Marion's abilities as a team leader were also recognised nationally, with appointments to managerial roles in Australian teams including the Pacific Conference Games in 1977, the Australia v New Zealand Match and Junior Tour to the USA in 1978 and the IAAF World Race Walking Cup in 1979.



*Left: 1972 Wimmera T&F Championships in Horsham – Marion with walks winner Alison Nicholls
Right.: 1979 Eschborn Cup - Marion with Australian team members Sally Pierson, Sue Orr and Lorraine Young*

Her accolades were many

- 1973 Life member, Brunswick Athletics Club - she remained a proud member of the club throughout her life
- 1986 Honorary Life Member, Athletics Australia
- 1986 Life Member, Athletics Victoria
- 1998 Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM)
- 2000 Australian Sports Award
- 2007 Athletics Australia Platinum Service Award (40 years officiating)

On a personal level, she worked at Glowave, a major Melbourne clothing manufacturer, for 43 years but eventually found herself homeless after she had retired and her house burnt down. For some time she lived in her car in the inner Melbourne suburbs before eventually getting long term accommodation via the Ministry of Housing. This daunting experience was not one that she dwelt upon once she found her feet again, but it did prompt her to become involved with Merri Outreach Support Service (MOSS), where she worked there as a general helper for some 15 years. She was then on the Committee of Governance for a number of years. Her explanation was a simple one:

I don't like to see people homeless, I have experienced this in my life.

Outside athletics, Marion also served as a member and vice president of the Brunswick Municipal Sports Committee and played the bass drum in the Coburg Ladies Pipe Band. She was a generous worker in the community for the less fortunate and on many occasions provided a "taxi" service to those who would have otherwise been unable to attend appointments and events.

VRWC President Stuart Cooper reminisced this week:

One incident in particular sticks in my mind, demonstrating her sympathetic yet no-nonsense approach to life. In the 80s, a long-time former distance walker-turned-judge (well known to us both) decided to pull his shoes on again with the aim of attacking some of the 70-80+year world records on offer. His flexibility and soundness of body (and, likely, his health) had diminished seriously with age but he would not be deterred. He started in several winter handicaps, but on one particularly warm day he collapsed and an ambulance was called. Marion was one of the first on the scene and, whilst waiting for the ambos to arrive, she gently but firmly told him that his racing days were past, that there was no shame in having to stop as everybody has to, and that he must do what was best for himself in this latter stage of his life. Typically, Marion spoke with authority and common sense, plus the respect and affection of one who knew what the sport meant to this man, and how hard it might be for him to have to stop practising it. It helped that she has known him well for many years, but it can't have been easy to have said these things, whether to a friend or stranger. But she cared enough for her club mate to speak to him in a way others may have considered presumptuous. (He took her advice, and no doubt that of clinicians as well.)

In later life, she struggled badly with arthritis and had a number of hip replacement operations, none of which were really successful. This slowed her down but did not stop her. She was a regular fixture with her mobility walker as she laboured to interclub each week in Melbourne and she was a regular official in the Call Room at all championships.

Those of us who worked with her have many happy memories of her dedication, her warmth and her calm demeanour.

Her funeral service will be held on Wednesday 14th March at 11:30AM at Victoria Funerals Chapel, 415-417 Victoria St, Brunswick.

Tim Erickson
Tuesday 6 March 2018