

MARK WALL – EXPATRIATE VICTORIAN STILL WALKING AFTER 36 YEARS

Mark Wall, who regularly updates us on the English walking scene, is well known to older Victorian walkers. Mark, who was born in Melbourne on 19th September 1956, started his walking career as a 17 year old in the first round of the 1973/74 Victorian Interclub competition and competed right through until 1989 on the Victorian and interstate front. A review of his career and contribution to Australian walking is long overdue so here goes!

Few athletes were more dedicated to their chosen sport and to their athletics club than Mark, competing in just about every interclub round from 1973 until 1989 and sometimes making two appearances a week given that 'A Grade' rounds were on Thursday evenings during some of these seasons. At the same time, like many of his peers, he competed in a range of events from relays, 800m/1500m, 5000m/steeple even to a lower grade Hammer throw! But walking was his speciality and his passion and that is what I will concentrate on in this article.

Just as he rarely missed an interclub, he rarely missed a road walk, joining VAWC in December 1973 and competing in just about all club events up until January 1990. He competed Summer and Winter, missing only the latter part of the 1979 (glandular fever) and the 1982 winter season (more of that later) and April to August 1984 (4 months in the UK).

His first few years in the sport were relatively inconspicuous, the highlight being in 1975 when the AAU (now Athletics Australia) decided to hold the first ever Junior (Under 19) 10km National championship. Mark was delighted to be selected to represent Victoria.

"I was only a bit player in the race as I was throughout my Under 19 career. The race, held at Kewdale in Western Australia, was won by Rod Huxley of NSW. The day after, a certain Tim Erickson won the National 50 km title ahead of Clarrie Jack and the late Jim Henderson, who was claimed by the officials to have edged out Peter Vysma for the bronze medal, I know that because it was me who manned the Victorian feeding table in the wet and rainy conditions."

Once he graduated to the Open ranks, Mark could be categorized as a track walker who had a fair turn of speed but who was yet to break through in the longer road distances. This was still the era of the National 3000m title and he regularly finished well up in this event, recording 4th, 5th and 7th in successive years. But road successes eluded him.

1979 was probably a turning point for Mark's career. That Easter, he had the opportunity to compete in an Australian Federation of Race Walking Clubs vs New Zealand match over 50km, taking 5th place. Later that year when Australia sent its first team to compete in the Lugano Cup championships in Europe, Mark travelled with the team as a spectator, racing in the warmup races and helping out when on the big day.



The 1979 Lugano Cup – Mark Wall far left on the feed station – 50 km team Willi Sawall, Greg Sockhill, John Sheard and Tim Erickson with manager Marion Patterson

Returning to Australia, his walking improved markedly and, in 1980/81, he won both the VAWC Fastest times and Handicap points competitions. Alas, in 1982 fate intervened to ensure that his progress would be rockier than planned. Walking a blinder in the 1982 Canberra 20 Mile event ¹ and with an outside chance of a medal finish, Mark was hit by a car and seriously injured when in sight of home and assured of a time in the low 2:40's. Mark described the scenario as follows:

"It was near the start of the the last mile and I was walking a stormer. It was the Commonwealth Drive Roundabout in Russell. It was uncontrolled and the motorist was looking only for traffic coming in from the normal direction. I took some evasive action but did not lift my left leg in time and ruptured ligaments. It was

¹ Mark recorded 8 Canberra 20 Mile finishes between 1976 and 1989 and one memorable non-finish in 1982.

essentially the old 1 lap course with some bike paths, it did cause a change in subsequent years.”

Not one to be put off by such setbacks, Mark was back in action for the opening round of Interclub in October 1982 and he slowly clawed his way back to form.

Mark spent the the bulk of the 1984 winter season in the UK, the highlight of the trip being a finish in the Manchester to Blackpool (51 ¾ miles) ultra distance classic. His final time of 9:41 was not far outside the gold Medal standard of 9:30.²

1986 was the year he recorded his PB of 4:33:13 for 50km.

My time of 4:33:13 was still 2 seconds slower than Harry Summers PB. I knew I should have skipped that drink! What is so special about this time? Well I was 3 minutes down on the leader Mark Donahoo and 1:30 down on Clarrie Jack at 40km, I did 65 minutes for the final 10km but so did they. We must have looked like three corks bobbing on a pond! Funny thing was no matter how much I was to improve my 20km times I never beat this time.

That year saw him end his Banking career after 12 years and return to full-time education to train as a teacher. The impact of which was to bear fruit in 1987 when he rewrote all his PBs.

I called it the ‘8 Glorious weeks’. I went from a 47 minute 10km walker to 45:10 in one hit around 2 laps of the lake, I did a 15km PB and then my 20km PB in Adelaide in a Federation (now RWA) event, the Campbell Cup. I was doing up to 200km a week by pursuing every mile I could, before lectures, after lectures, early morning just about every opportunity.



1989 Interclub meet in Melbourne – Mark leads Mark Dossetor and Peter Vysma

1989 was his final year on the road in Victoria and it produced his first and only Australian championship medal – a bronze in the Australian 20 km championship in Perth – as well as his first Victorian championship gold medal – in the Victorian 50 km title in Melbourne. This, added to his various bronze and silver Victorian Championship medals, capped off his career nicely.³

In 1990, Mark married, moved to Tasmania and all but disappeared from the scene. A couple of Tasmanian 50 km titles (lonely experiences as the sole starter) showed that he was still dabbling with the sport but no major milestones occurred. This was followed by moves in the late 1990s to Victoria, the Northern Territory and then in 2000 to Western Australia before he finally moved to the UK in August 2001.

2 The event awards Gold Medal Standards to those below 9:30 and Bronze Medal Standards to those below 11:00. Mark's time of 9:41 earned him the Bronze Standard.

3 His Victorian championship placings (as per my records) were

1981	Vic 50km	Sawall, Willi	4.13.48	Cooper, Stewart	4.58.18	Wall, Mark	5.05.23
1986	Vic 50km	Donahoo, Mark	4.30.14	Jack, Clarrie	4.32.08	Wall, Mark	4.33.13
1986	Vic 30km	Jack, Clarrie	2.33.24	Vysma, Peter	2.42.54	Wall, Mark	2.44.00
1987	Vic 50km	Waters, Ian	4.29.13	Dyer, Bill	4.38.58	Wall,	Mark
			4.42.399				
1988	Vic 10km	Donahoo, Mark	43.25.2	Wall, Mark	45.26.3	Thomas, Mark	47.05.8
1989	Vic 30km	Sawall, Willi	2.23.20	Erickson, Tim	2.29.10	Wall, Mark	2.37.01
1989	Vic 50km	Mark Wall	4:35:40	-	-	-	-

Since then, he has been a regular competitor with the Leicester Walking Club, racing nearly every week ⁴ and throwing himself into UK walking affairs with typical enthusiasm. You can read his walking profile on the excellent RaceWalkUK website at <http://www.racewalkuk.com/AthleteDetails.asp?id=33&pg=1>



Mark (number 23 in the blue Leicester singlet) in the 2007 Blackpool 50 Mile walk in England

When interviewed for this article in early 2009, he rated his proudest moment as his 2008 Blackpool 50 miles when, at 51 years of age, he finished 3rd in 9:09:06, a very respectable time indeed. He was also very pleased to pick up a bronze medal in the 2009 European Masters championships in Aarhus in May of that year. But this all paled into insignificance with one superb performance in July 2009 when he qualified as a UK Centurion.

Mark showed interest in long distance walking in Australia in the seventies when the Australian Centurions were in full swing, completing 70.3km in Gosford in 1978 and 50 miles in 10:54:19 in Clifton Hill in 1979. When interviewed in early 2009, he noted one of his major regrets as his failure to become a centurion despite upwards of six attempts in Australia and two in the UK. His last attempt in Australia was in October 1983 when, in a Melbourne based 24 Hour event, he retired at the 50 mile mark, reached in 11:35.

This was to be rectified in July 2009 when in the UK Centurions annual qualifying event at the Newmarket Racecourse in London, he came 4th overall, completing the 100 mile distance in a time of 21:08:36, thus becoming a member of the world's most exclusive club as Centurion number 1071.



Mark becomes centurion number 1071 in July 2009 at Newmarket Racecourse in England – undoubtedly is proudest moment in a long walking career.

⁴ His profile on RaceWalkUK shows his yearly racing appearances as follows - 2009: 20 races, 2008: 51 races, 2007: 54 races, 2006: 49 races, 2005: 30 races

We had hopes that Mark might return to Australia at some stage and qualify as a centurion on home soil and it so it was in April 2011 when he became Australian Centurion number 59 at the Coburg 24 Hour carnival in Melbourne, his time 23:20:41.



Mark qualifies as Australian Centurion number 59 in April 2011 with a time of 23:20.41

Mark's career was always marked by his willingness to become involved as an official and administrator. He joined the VAWC committee in the mid 1970's and served continuously until 1990, filling roles as Senior Vice President, Club Captain, Selector and even Acting Secretary for 2-3 weeks. He was also a regular contributor to the Heel and Toe magazine where his 'Writing on the Wall' column was keenly anticipated. 'Australasian Track and Field', the Mike Agostini magazine, long gone now, also received regular stories and reports from Mark and his efforts helped ensure that walking remained a high profile event on the Australian calendar.

He started to judge in the late 1970's and went on to be chief at the Australian Championships in Perth in 1987 and the 1990 Schools Championship in Hobart. He was also a registered official and regularly officiated in the wider Track and Field program.

I still recall the trepidation felt when timing or judging sprints or avoiding falling poles and cross bars in the pole vault!

He even served as the VAAA Portfolio Manager for Selection and was on the Association's Championship and Special Meetings Committee for three years. He was awarded life membership of the Box Hill Athletics club in the late 1980's, a fitting recognition for a consummate clubman.

Mark is now teaching in the UK (Northampton) and has shown the same willingness to become involved in the sport of racewalking at all levels. He is the Chairman of the County AA, Chair of its Development Group, is newly elected to England Athletics Regional Council (9 regions to cover England) and has been on the Regional Coaching Committee, the Competition Committee and its Endurance Forum. He is also a Member of the General Committee of the Midlands Race walk Association and recently travelled with the English team to the 2009 Dublin International Grand Prix as team coach.

I will leave Mark with the last word:

I am proud to have been a part of the Victorian Race Walking Club, enjoying friends and peers from the best to the least, from the 1970's to the 1990's. I was part of the historical transition that saw the foundations of Australia's current success, albeit in my own small way. I was there when we started the Sunday Morning Sessions at the Tan, with all the stories those adventures recall. I even remember Tim, Clarrie and Ian starting their Sunday sessions from Oakleigh in the years that preceded that. Someone once threatened me that 'I was going to be history'; I guess I am.