

I am saddened to advise that VRWC life member Ralph Field passed away last week at The Avenue Hospital after a short illness. Ralph, born in 1913, was just short of his 94th birthday and had maintained good health up until the last few months.

Ralph was born in Leongatha, Victoria, and raised at Caulfield. His working life started with an apprenticeship as a hand compositor in the printing industry. He joined St Stephen's Harriers at the age of 20 and competed, initially, as a middle distance runner. It was only as a result of a fallen arch in one foot (from running ½ mile and 1 mile races) that he turned to walking and was immediately successful.

Starting in the C grade walk in Interclub competition, he progressed to the St Stephen's A grade team in 1935 – and then remained a member of their A grade team until 1962, a timespan of 27 years.



A Vic. Track race in the early 1950's – Ted Allsopp, George Knott, Ray Smith and Ralph Field hold the first 4 places

He was amongst the top Victorians in the late 1940's and 1950's and regularly mixed it with the top Australian walkers of that era. His best Australian championship result was in 1954 when he took bronze in the Australian 50 km championship (5:05:47) behind Les Hellyer and Jim Short. That same year, he took bronzes in the Victorian 10,000m (50:38) and the Victorian 10 Mile championship (1:23:57) and took silver in the Victorian 50 km (5:00:55) behind Les Hellyer, missing gold by the narrow margin of 55 seconds. Ralph's 49:40 performance for the 10k walk in 1953 is the longest-standing St Stephen's club record.

He also represented Victoria in various Australian championships of that era. The photo below shows the Victorian team for the Australian 10,000m Walk Championships which were held in Brisbane in 1955.



Ralph served as an official at the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games and as a leading racewalking judge for many years. Older members will remember him judging at Melbourne University, Olympic Park and other venues.

He married Maisie Gillam in 1941. Their three sons, Gary, Bruce and Ross followed Ralph into the sport of amateur athletics. Bruce went on to represent Australia in the 1972 Olympic Games and in the 1974 Commonwealth Games, competing over 400m, 400m Hurdles and Long Jump.

Ralph took his family to major athletics competitions held at Olympic Park during the 1950s and 1960s, the golden era of Australian athletics. The Field family also attended virtually all VAWC events and functions during those decades.

Ralph was one of the many VAWC members who helped at the working bees involved in the construction of the Alf Robinson Clubrooms in the early 1960's. His normal task was working alongside Jim Gaylor cleaning bricks and, over many weekends, he gradually helped our clubrooms take shape.

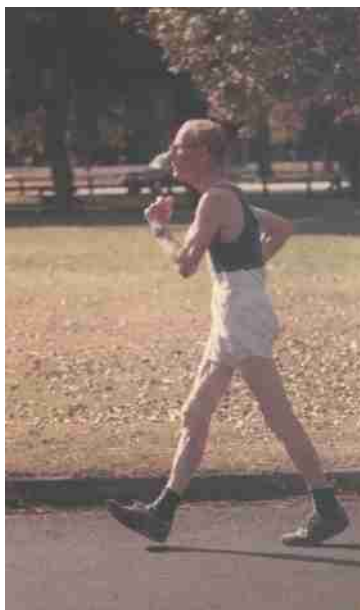
For many years, Ralph and Maisie provided the annual race numbers for VAAA, thus providing valuable club funds for VAWC. This was a huge annual job that involved producing thousands of numbers. Initially other members helped but eventually it was left to Ralph to do it alone. In the early sixties he volunteered to help Alan Hancock in producing the 'Heel and Toe' magazine. Ralph provided the paper and printed the headings while Alan did the editorial work. Even now, the family connection continues as our VRWC racing numbers are supplied by Bruce who prints them as a sideline to his professional career as Associate Professor of Engineering at Monash University. Ralph's oldest son Gary also carried on the family tradition and worked in the printing industry.

Ralph started Melbourne's first printing forme-cutting service and his family actively participated in this highly regarded business. He received world wide recognition for his innovative telescope designs. He also designed and built the special machines and equipment needed to fabricate the optical elements of telescopes.

Ralph was awarded VAWC life membership in 1964 in recognition of his many services to the club. He was earned life memberships of St Stephen's Hawthorn Athletics Club and of Athletics Victoria.

He was VAWC club handicapper for some years and always knew exactly what time he would do. Such was his honest approach to walking that, after he stopped doing the handicaps, he was not happy when someone got away with playing dead to get a win.

Personally, I well remember Ralph racing weekly at Albert Park in the sixties and seventies. He was a consummate club man, content to compete each week for fitness to keep his old mate Jim Short company at the back of the field. They started together, walked together and normally finished together. He continued to race until the early 1980's when hip problems forced his retirement.



Ralph still competing in the late 1970's

A hip replacement in the late 1980's gave him a new lease of life and he resumed his walking, competing in the older divisions in Masters competitions. After he wore out his first replacement hip, he had a second operation and then resumed racing! He capped his competitive career with the gold medal for the 85-89 age group 5000m walk in the 2002 World Masters Games, held in Melbourne.

Although we only saw Ralph at Albert Park for the occasional AGM in recent years, he still maintained a keen interest in the club and was kept in the loop by many of our older club members. He will be missed by his many mates in racewalking.

Ralph died of complications related to his 2003 hip replacement surgery after an illness of several months.

Tim Erickson
Monday 12 November 2007