

Vale Ray Smith: 1929-2010



Born on 12th August 1929, Ray competed as a junior with Coburg Harriers and joined VAWC in 1947. A natural walker, he was second in the Australian Junior 10,000m championship (53:29) in his first year with the club, walked in Sydney on a course of 6 laps to the mile!

He quickly broke through into the top senior ranks with the silver medal at the 1949 Australian 2 mile track title (14:44) at only 20 years of age. From then on, he was a regular placegetter in the major championships, showing talent over all distances. He was strongly built at 6 ft 2 in and 189 lbs.



A young Ray Smith wins on the track ahead of Ted Allsopp in the early 1950's

He joined the famous Cerutti group at Portsea in 1953 and was advised by him for the remainder of his career. He was not the only walker in this elite group – Don Keane, who had represented Australia in the 1952 Olympics, was also a regular at Percy's beach property. Together, they trained alongside the top runners of the day – men like Dave Power, John Landy and Herb Elliot. Percy's unique motivational coaching produced a succession of champions. It was an

environment that predated the modern Institute of Sport but was just as successful in nurturing talent and inspiring athletes to aim for the top.

Percy had no time for slackers – only full commitment was acceptable. But Ray and Don were up to the task. The following letter, written by Percy to his wife, sums up Portsea well. Imagine the group of elite walkers and runners, satisfyingly exhausted from work on the property and training, relaxing with Percy at the end of another hard day.

Darling,

We have had a good meal washed down by, of all things, champagne! (produced by Don Keane). Now we are all gathered around, listening to a beautiful long-playing record of Ray Smith's - Wagner and Sibelius. Some boys sit in the semi-dark in the armchairs listening, Don Keane reclines full length, eyes closed. Ray sits at the table with me, and I, of course, write. We are listening to the overture of Tannhauser, with all its runs and variations.

This is the ideal life. Hard exercise, work, good food, good wine, rest and music. It is a moment of perfection for men, when they feel as men should.

So here we sit. I, for one, perfectly content: never happier: never been more certain of myself and the future - but being what I am, my thoughts turn to you, and so I write. Men feel like this in Olympic Villages - in Arctic camps - on the slopes of Everest - even up on Bogong or in the huts of Hotham. There are some places where women are intruders - but in the end the men will yearn to be back with their women - and so return, we hope, as conquering heroes.

Indeed there can be a terrific sense of destiny and the dramatic where there is music and quiet. It is out of such states that the seeds of greatness generate - and the effect on these boys can be incalculable. I feel the powers in me. I feel I could run a 4 minute mile myself. God bless my soul, I believe Ray could walk one. ¹

In 1954, under Percy's guidance, Ray decided to train for the 1956 Olympic 50 km event and started what was for him his most important walking period. This culminated with his top walking performances in the 1955-56 timeframe.

His first outing over the 50 km distance was on 27 August 1955 in a VAWC 50k club championship race over the Olympic course. According to his training diary, he retired at the 21 mile mark with leg problems.

Five weeks later he fronted for the 1955 Victorian 50 km championship on 1st October. He led all the way on the tough out-and-back Showgrounds/Rockbank course only to be caught and passed by Jim Short as he left Ballarat Road to go down the hill and on to the showgrounds. The loss spurred him on.



Ray leads a track walk at Olympic Park in early 1956

¹ *Why Die? The Extraordinary Percy Cerrutti* by Graeme Sims, Lothian Books, South Melbourne, 2003, p194

He had finished his first 50 km event and this, combined with his top position in the Australian ranking over the 20 km distance (**1:39:24**) gave him a lot of confidence as he headed towards the Olympic trial.

His next outing over the 50 km distance was the 1956 Australian 50 km title race and Olympic trial. This event was held on the Olympic Games course on Sunday 9th September 1956, starting and finishing at Olympic Park rather than the MCG. Walking a wonderful race, he finished 2nd to New Zealander Norm Read (who went on to win the 1956 Olympic 50 km race). Ray's time of **4:40:24** broke the Australian record and won him the Australian Title. It also gained him selection, along with Ron Crawford and Ted Allsopp, in the 50 km for the 1956 Olympic Games.

His success was never contemplated by the Officials Selection Committee. Most athletes in those days officiated whenever possible and he had been named as an official well before the trial. In fact, he had already collected all the officials uniform in preparation for his role as an official.

His fourth and final 50 km race was the Olympic event in November 1956. His racing strategy tells the story. He led through the 5 km mark with Abdom Pamich and held on with the lead group until the 10 km mark. Then he faded in the hot conditions, passing the half way mark in 10th place. On the long return trip home, his Portsea training saw him come to the fore and he passed a number of flagging walkers to finish sixth (**4:56:08**). It was a finely judged race in hot conditions.



A fine study of Ray towards the end of the 1956 Olympic 50 km walk

Possessed of an impeccable style and impressive speed, he had a best time of **6:35** for the 1 mile walk. His 8 year career up until 1956 saw him win Victorian, NSW and Australian titles over a variety of distances ranging from 2 Miles to 50 km. The main highlights were as follows

1948 Victorian Championship 10 mile Walk	Silver
1949 Australian Championship 2 mile Walk	Silver
1949 Victorian Championship 2 mile Walk	Bronze
1950 Victorian Championship 10k Walk	Gold
1950 Australian Championship 10k Teams Walk	Silver
1950 Victorian Championship 2 mile Walk	Gold
1951 Victorian Championship 10 mile Walk	Silver
1951 Australian Championship 2 mile Walk	Bronze
1952 Victorian Championship 2 mile Walk	Silver
1952 New South Wales Championship 2 mile Walk	Gold
1955 Victorian Championship 50k Walk	Silver
1956 Australian Championship 50k Teams Walk	Silver

1956 Australian Championship 50k Walk	Gold
1956 Australian Championship 2 mile Walk	Bronze
1956 Olympic Games - Melbourne 50k Walk	Sixth

Shortly after the 1956 Olympics, Ray incurred a complicated knee injury whilst cross training. He battled on for 18 months before undergoing surgery. Residual effects put to an end any possibility of making it to the 1960 Olympics in Rome.

But like many of the champion walkers of past eras, he continued to compete at club level for many years and was a role model for the younger walkers as they progressed through the ranks. His last serious long walk was in the 1969 at the annual Australian Federation of Race Walking 20 Mile Championship in Canberra. Although just about to turn 40, he still came 6th in a good time of 3:10:08 and left many of the younger walkers in his wake. At the finish, he was heard to remark to two fellow Victorians:

“You young blokes might be able to walk faster than me but you can’t walk any b... harder”.

Ray battled on until 1972 when the inaugural World Veterans Track and Field Meet was to be held in Cologne in Germany. There he competed in the 10 km racewalk and came 10th in a time of 56:45. This meet was the forerunner to World Veterans Championships.

This was the last time he competed and he classified that as his retirement date.

Once he hung up his walking shoes, he threw himself into the sport as an official, administrator and judge. This culminated in his appointment as an IAAF judge. In this capacity, he officiated at many international meetings in the 1980s and the 1990s.

His list of non-competitive achievements in the sport is perhaps even more impressive than his competitive record and shows just how much he contributed on so many levels.

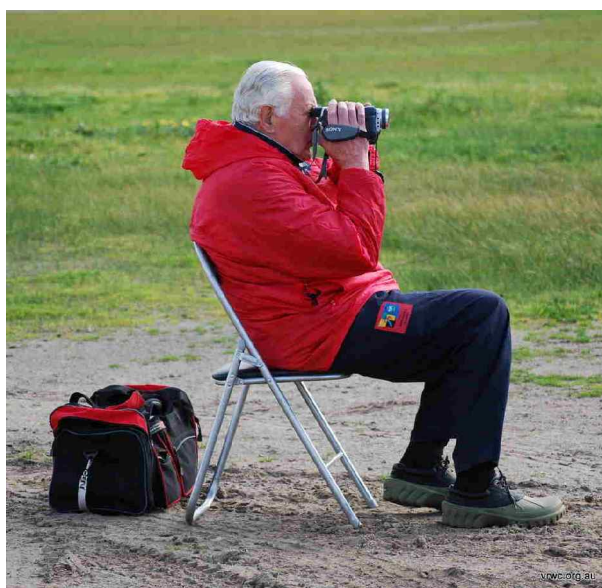
- Australian Olympic Team 1956
- Australian Sports Medal 2000
- IAAF Race Walking Walking Committee [retired]
- IAAF Race Walking Judge [retired]
- Athletics Australia - Life Member
- Athletics Victoria - Life Member
- Coburg Harriers - Life member
- Victorian Race Walking Club - Life Member
- Athletics Victoria 50 year Membership Award
- Athletics Victoria 50 Year Officiating Award
- Race Walking Australia 40 Year Merit Award

During his 19 years as an IAAF judge, he judged nearly every year at international competitions and could lay claim to be Australia’s most experienced judge.

- 1975 Australian Team Tour - Singapore - Judge
- 1977 3rd Pacific Conference Games - Canberra - Judge
- 1979 IAAF Race Walking World Cup - Eschborn, FRG - Judge
- 1979 Australian Team Tour - Boras, Sweden - Judge
- 1980 XX11 Olympic Games - Moscow - Judge
- 1982 X11 Commonwealth Games- Brisbane - Judge
- 1985 Australia Games - Melbourne - Judge (chief)
- 1985 IAAF Race Walking World Cup - Isle of Mann - Judge
- 1986 X111 Commonwealth Games - Edinburgh - Judge
- 1986 British Junior Road Championships - Morecambe - Judge
- 1987 IAAF Race Walking World Cup - New York - Judge (chief)
- 1987 IAAF World Championships - Rome - Judge
- 1987 IAAF World Indoor Championships - Indianapolis - Judge
- 1987 Republic of China, National Games - Zhengzhou - Judge
- 1987 World Veteran Games - Melbourne - Judge (chief)
- 1988 XX1V Olympic Games - Seoul - Judge
- 1989 IAAF Race Walking World Cup - Barcelona - Judge (chief)
- 1989 AIS - Seiko Invitational - Canberra - Judge (chief)
- 1990 X1V Commonwealth Games - Auckland - Judge (chief)

1991 IAAF Race Walking World Cup - San Jose, Cal. - Judge
1992 IAAF World Junior Championships - Seoul - Judge
1995 World Police and Fire Games - Melbourne - Judge
2001 World Veterans' Athletics Championships - Brisbane - Judge
2001 Goodwill Games - Brisbane - Judge

Ray remained active in the Victorian Race Walking Club throughout his later years, judging there regularly until he eventually decided to hang up the paddles in 2006. At the same time, he finally stopped producing his weekly VRWC news bulletin on race days and retired from his position as club communications office. But Ray was never one to sit back quietly so he simply moved to the video camera, experimenting as he went, and producing high quality weekly videos of all VRWC races right up till the end of the 2009 winter season. He was in his element sitting in the clubrooms the next week and explaining to the intricacies of the walking technique and how each could improve his/her style. His knowledge of the sport was encyclopedic and his enthusiasm never slowed with the passing years. This willingness to 'put in' made him a highly valued member of the VRWC Committee and the club and we shall all miss him greatly.



Ray in recent activity mode – filming at the Walkers Club races at Albert Park

Ray died on Friday 4th June 2010, aged 80. He remained healthy, involved and interested in all things athletic until the end.

When asked a few years ago to summarise his Olympic achievement, he commented as follows:

“Percy Cerruty turned me into a well trained plodder who found 15 minutes of fame in the longest event on the track and field program.”

Tim Erickson
Secretary, Victorian Race Walking Club
Friday 4 June 2010