

I noticed a comment about a former racewalking career in the *Melbourne Age* newspaper Obituary pages of Wednesday 19 February and it prompted me to do some research in our VRWC archives. After several hours of rummaging through annual reports and race results, I am able to put together what I think is quite an interesting article on club member Richard (Dick) Coyle who died last month, aged 91. Non-walk related information is taken from the Age obituary: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/obituaries/physicist-who-loved-family-and-fairness-20140218-32yd4.html>



Richard Alan Coyle 1922-2014 (photo <http://www.theage.com.au>)

Richard Alan Coyle was born in New Zealand on 31st May 1922 and relocated to Shepparton, Victoria, when his father, Bertie, was commissioned to build a fruit cannery for the Shepparton Preserving Company - now SPC Ardmona - a co-operative headed up by orchardist Tom James. Coyle was three when he met his future wife, James' eldest daughter Ruth.

He moved to Melbourne to complete his secondary schooling at Melbourne Boys' High School, where he developed an interest in race-walking and a reputation for walking in bare feet. He joined the Victorian Amateur Walkers' Club (VAWC) and Melbourne High School Old Boys (MHSOB) athletics club and was a regular on the racewalking scene while in the undergraduate phase of his University career.

Alas, he had found racewalking at the wrong time and, as his career flourished, the club wound down its activities as more and more of its members and administrators and officials answered the call and enrolled for active war service.

In June 1941, aged 19, he was third in the Club 5 Mile Championship (40:05) and, from then on, he was a regular placegetter in the handicap and fastest times competitions. In the final summer season of club competition (1941/1942), he recorded fastest time overall in 7 of the 9 club competitions and was the dominant walker on the track.

As the world war intensified, he interrupted his studies in applied physics and, in early 1942, joined the Navy, training at Rushcutters Bay, Sydney. In his first posting as a sublieutenant and radar officer on the HMAS Manoora, he helped train Army troops to embark on landing boats in rough seas. The ship later sailed with troops, trucks and tanks to New Guinea to resist Japanese landings. After a long stint on watch one day, he remembered that it had been his 21st birthday (he wouldn't celebrate it until two years later). Coyle became the port radar officer at Cairns, looking after ships returning after the Japanese retreated from New Guinea. His last naval appointment was as "Acting Temporary Provisional on Probation Lieutenant Special Branch" in Darwin.

Post WWII, he finally graduated as a Fellow of the Melbourne Technical College, now RMIT University. Later still, RMIT would award him a Master of Applied Science (Applied Physics) by research - he had authored 50 papers during his career.

Following the war, Dick developed and built electronic instruments for metallurgical research as a technical officer in the Division of Tribophysics, CSIRO, Carlton. He then became a laboratory assistant at the Munitions Supply Laboratory, Maribyrnong, where he designed and operated X-ray diffraction equipment for materials research and identification.

Post WWII, he also returned to racewalking and had a couple of very successful years.

His comeback race was a VAWC 1 Mile Handicap walk at Clifton Hill on 7th January 1947 in which he came 7th in a time of 7:16, a long way behind his pre-war 1941 PB of 6:25. But from there, he quickly improved, taking 4th place in the Victorian 1 Mile track walk, winning the Victorian 3 Mile track walk (21:30.0), taking second in the Victorian 10,000m track walk (51:13) and second again in the Victorian 10 Mile road walk championship (1:21:54). His main opposition came in the form of Collingwood Harriers walker George Knott who, coincidentally, had been his main speed rival in his short pre-war career.



The newspaper reported on his win in the Victorian 3 Mile walk with the following caption and photos

WHAT THE JUDGES DID NOT SEE: A close-up of the feet of R. A. Coyle (left), winner of the Victorian three-mile walking championship at Olympic Park on Saturday, shows clearly that at one stage of the race, he had both feet off the ground.

It was not unknown for walkers to race barefeet on the grass tracks of the time and he was well known for it.

He also won the 1947 VAWC 1 Mile Track Club Championship (6:30), the VAWC 3 Mile Track Club Championship (21:17) and finished second to Knott in the 1947 VAWC Summer Season Fastest Times competition.

With such a fine season behind him, he was selected in the Victorian racewalking team to contest the Glover Shield, an annual 10,000m track championship contested by the various racewalking Club. Although I do not have the results (alas, our archives are not complete), the following report was published in the VAWC Annual Report for that year.

10,000m Teams Race between the Australian Walking Clubs

Seniors G. Knott, E. Allsop, F. Morrison, C. Barling, W Medcalf and R. Coyle, with juniors E. Allsop, R. Smith, J Pettigrove and J Cox, with B Blakey as an individual competitor, journeyed to Sydney for this annual event. On a waterlogged track, totally unsuitable for a race of this importance, G. Knott won the individual title in the very slow time of 49:48.. By failing to fill four places,, however, the seniors lost the shield which had been in the possession of our club for 12 years. Our juniors excelled themselves by securing the possible minimum number of points, finishing Allsop 1, Smith 2 and Petticrew 3.

I am not sure of Coyle finished or whether he was one of those who succumbed to the wet conditions.



The Victorian team for the 1947 Glover Shield 10,000m in Sydney - Coyle is 3rd from left in the back row

1948 saw him walking again but playing second fiddle to a rampant George Knott. He took silvers behind Knott in both the Victorian 1 Mile track walk championship (25 yards behind Knott who won in 6:23.2) and in the Victorian 3 Mile track walk championship. He was third behind Knott and NSW walker Athol Stubbs in the Australian 2 Mile track walk Championship but it was Knott who scored the accolades with a new Australian record of 13:37.2.

Knott followed up these fine walks with a win in the 1947 Australian 10 km title and a world best time for the 10,000m track walk. These performances gained him a late callup for the 1948 Olympics in London where he finished 7th in his heat in the 10,000m walk.

With his Olympic dream now dead and buried, Dick called quits on his walking career and moved on to more important matters.

He and Ruth were married in 1948 in St James' Old Cathedral, Melbourne. The newlyweds bought land in Lee Avenue, Syndal and commissioned their new home before sailing to London, where Coyle worked at the British National Physical Laboratory, Teddington. During their two-and-a-half years there, the Coyles caught both the 1951 Festival of Britain and the 1953 Queen's Coronation and Richard assembled one of the first modern computers. Later, he designed an X-ray diffractometer and studied metallic solid solutions.

Returning home, Coyle was promoted to experimental officer at the Aeronautical Research Laboratory, Fishermans Bend, specialising in X-ray diffraction and aircraft instrumentation. He also studied metal fatigue, fibre patching of metals and carbon-fibre technology, and worked on car-seatbelt design. He travelled the world presenting his findings. He was awarded the Florence Taylor Medal by the Australian Institute of Metals, the Rocklabs award for a new drive to a microdensitometer, and the Australian X-Ray Analytical Association Honorary Life Membership for services to X-ray diffraction science.

Coyle was a founding member of the Australian Institute of Physics and the Society of Crystallographers in Australia. He was also a member of the Australian Institute of Metals and the Digital Electronic Company User Group. In 1986 he became an honorary research fellow in the Physics Department at Monash University.

In retirement Coyle led a team to install a radar system on the naval ship HMAS Castlemaine, moored at Williamstown.

As the family grew to include six children, the Coyles underscored their commitment to quality education by providing them all with private-school secondary education. Feminism and equality of opportunity were the norm.

Coyle passed on his sense of humour and his intolerance of pomposity. He defined experts as "X being the unknown substance while 'spurt' is a drip under pressure". He tolerated his children's definition of a physicist as "someone who works in the Coca-Cola factory putting in the bubbles".

Coyle excelled as a scientist, sailor, family man, churchman, community leader and academic. He loved family, fuchsias and fairness, and passed on his appetite for reading, walking and nature. He was famously tone-deaf as a singer. He could quickly cut to the essence of a problem, whether scientific, mechanical or practical.

Richard is survived by Ruth (nee James), one son, four daughters and nine grand-children.

Tim Erickson
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