

ROBIN WOOD

If you review the club records on the Coburg Harriers Honour Board in their clubrooms at the Harold Stephens Track, you will see one particularly old set of records, namely the U17 – U20 5000m track walk (23:34) and the U17 – U20 10000m track walk (50:41).

It comes as no surprise to see the name against the records – Robin Wood. Those of you who see Robin pacing himself each week at Albert Park may not know that in a former life he was Australian Junior champion and one of our top walkers for a number of years.

Robin, born 20 January 1950, joined Coburg Harriers in 1964 as a 14 year old and was soon a regular walker with the VAWC at Albert Park. His first big breakthrough was in June 1966 when, in the Victorian 10,000m track walking championship at the Melbourne University track, he broke the Victorian Sub Junior 5 mile (40:35) and 10,000m (50:41) records. Two months later, again at Melbourne University, he took his third Under 17 State record, recording 25:00 for 5000m. He finished off the winter season with First and Fastest Time in the annual 3 laps of Lake Wendoree in Ballarat (97:04) and 6th in the Melbourne to Frankston 25 Mile handicap with 4:02:25.

His rapid rise through the ranks was interrupted by an emergency appendix removal but by December 1966 he was back in business and the summer saw him set new Victorian Sub Junior records for 3000m (14:53.2, 10/12/66), 3 Miles (22:46.8, 10/01/67) and 5000m (23:34, 10/01/67). His road times were even faster. He won the Victorian Junior (Under 19) Track 1 Mile walk title in February 1967 with a very fast 6:58 and from then on, he was firmly on the radar as one of the top prospects in the country. It should be noted that the tracks of that period were cinders and often soft and broken and definitely not as conducive to fast times as our modern synthetic surfaces.

He started the 1967 winter season with first place in the VAWC 4 mile handicap in a super fast 30:16 and followed with an easy win in the AFRWC Robinson Shield (Junior 10,000m), recording 51:23 to win by over 1 minute from Graeme Nicholls. In fact, he was the fifth fastest overall, beating all but 4 of the senior walkers. That winter, he also won his first Victorian senior medal, taking 3rd in the 10 mile track championship with 1:19:29 and breaking the 100 minute barrier for the 20 km, recording 1:39:55 in the Australian Open 20 km championship in July 1967.

By 1968, Robin was clearly the top U19 in Australia and duly won the Australian Junior 3000m track title in Sydney. Plunging straight into the lead, he was never troubled and recorded 14:02.8 ahead of NSW walker Stephen Hausfeld. The positions were the same in the AFRWC Robinson Shield in Adelaide a few months later with Robin winning the 10 km road event in 50:01 ahead of Hausfeld.



1972 Victorian 20 km – Robin Wood, Graeme Nicholls and Alan Lucas

Coburg boasted a strong team of young walkers that included Alan Lucas, Robin, Robert Williams, Greg Carter and Bill Cullen. Once Robin moved out of Junior ranks, he seemed content to compete with his clubmates and at a VRWC

level. Although he regularly won the VAWC Fastest Times and Handicaps Awards, results show that he did not build on his excellent junior career. He had the occasional top walk such as his 1969 win in the 15 mile St Kilda to Chelsea event (124:34) and his 1969/1970 Summer season times of 14:08 for a track 2 Mile and 21:51 for an Albert Park 3 Mile race. But on most other occasions, he was content to stay at his current level and enjoy his walking, without getting overly serious.

It was not until 1973 that we saw a re- invigorated Robin. He seemed finally ready for a serious season and gave notice of things to come when he led the Coburg team to victory in the Victorian 8 km Walking Teams Race (Robin 2nd, Alan Lucas 3rd and Bill Cullen 4th). Other strong results during the winter saw him selected to represent Victoria in the Australian 50 km championship in Queensland. His father Ron was team manager and prepared a strong team of young walkers to represent the State. On a hot and humid day and with a course that was very hilly and almost certainly over distance, the Victorians performed well, taking 2nd to 6th places and winning the Teams Event. Robin himself finished like a train to take second place in 4:57:21, only a few minutes behind a tiring Robin Whyte. It was certainly Robin's best Open result and should have heralded a new lease of life for the young walker.

But it was not to be. Robin had struggled for motivation for some years and in 1974, he walked away from the sport. It was a big loss for walking but Robin simply had other things to do and other priorities in life. It is great to see him back now walking each week at Albert Park. Indeed, few athletics disciplines can boast the number of former greats who continue their involvement with their chosen sport long after their glory days are over.

It would be remiss of me, when focusing on Robin's career, not to mention the enormous contribution that his father Ron made to the sport of racewalking. When Robin joined Coburg Harriers in early 1964, Ron also threw himself into the fray and went on in later years to join the club committee and take on the role of press correspondent. He also followed Robin to VAWC and was soon Race Secretary, timekeeper and lap steward. In 1966, when the club was very short of judges, he took on that role also. From then on, he would take the fees when people arrived, then go out and judge (just like our current treasurer Michael Bodey!).

In those days, many of our races were point to point (eg Melbourne to Frankston) or in the country (eg Werribee or Geelong). Ron was always there in his little car, giving people lifts, driving past with cheeky words of good cheer and generally providing that vital support when needed. He also travelled interstate to judge an numerous Federation and AAU events.

When a group of us young and keen walkers were preparing for the Australian 50 km championship in 1973, Ron picked us up on Sunday mornings and took us out to the hilly country north of Tullamarine airport to train. I personally remember those times with great warmth.

It was a sad day for the club when he died suddenly at only 63 years of age as the result of a massive heart attack.