

RUSSELL MILLER: 1955 – 1977

Russell Miller, born December 1955, was an extraordinary talent, sadly lost to the sport at a young age and, even more sadly, killed in a motor cycle accident in July 1977.

Russell, from the Melbourne suburb of Eltham, burst onto the racewalking scene in 1970, aged 14. Tall and lean and with a head of shaggy locks, he was possessed of great speed and superb endurance, a combination rarely seen in one so young. A member of Ivanhoe Harriers, he quickly started rewriting the Victorian record books.

In May 1970 Russell had his first race with VAWC, in a 5 Miles handicap at Albert Park. His time of **42:45** was noted by the Heel & Toe editor as "*the best effort of the day*". His next VAWC race came 3 weeks later and was a 10 Miles Handicap walk, where he recorded a time of **1:28:29**.

The 14 year old Russell was a surprise starter in the Victorian 50km championship in July 1970. Conditions were very windy, with cold and rain settling in towards the end of the race, but Russell was undaunted, finishing 5th with a time of **5:11:47**. The toughness of the race can be seen from the fact that only 6 of the 13 starters finished.

He celebrated his 15th birthday in December 1970 with a win in the 1500m walk at the Shell East Coast Sub-Junior meet in Brisbane, with a Queensland record time of **6:46**.

In a VAAA Interclub meet in January 1971, he broke his own Victorian Sub-Junior (U17) 1500m walk record with a time of **6:26.8**. Aged 15 years and 2 months at that time, he had nearly 2 years left in which to attack Steve Hausfeld's Australian Sub-Junior record of 6:13.5, but such was his ambivalence that he never bothered chasing the record any further.

He won the Victorian Sub-Junior 1500m Track Walk Championship on 6th February 1971 with **6:32.9**, a clean sheet from the judges confirming the quality of his walk. The next day, he was untroubled to win the Victorian Junior 3000m Track Walk Championship with a strong **14:07.6**.

A week later in Victorian Open 3000m Track Walk Championship, he nearly completed a huge upset. Sitting in second place behind Ross Hayward and well clear of Bob Gardiner and Ted Allsopp with only 200m to go, he was disqualified.

Sadly, Russell did not travel to Brisbane the next month for the Australian Junior 3000m Track Walk Championship as, on times, he would almost certainly have medalled.

Russell finished his summer season with 4th place in the VAWC Club Championship 10,000m Track Walk, after losing third place to the older Robin Wood in a last lap sprint. His time of **50:11** was an indication of what was to come in the winter.

His performance in the Victorian 10,000m Track Walk Championship on 8th May 1971 was the first of a number of significant winter season performances. Although he finished back in 9th place in a star studded field, his time of **49:54.0** was a new Victorian Sub-Junior record. But his 5 mile time of **38:10** the week earlier indicated that he had lots more to take off his 10km time.

Later that month, he won the Jubilee Shield Sub-Junior 5km title in Melbourne with **24:14**, after walking away in the second half from the best that Australia had to offer.

May was certainly a big month for Russell and he ended it with a superb walk in the Ian McDougall Memorial Handicap (15 Miles Walk) on the VRWC 1 Mile course near the clubrooms at Albert Park. Severe wind and cold greeted the 33 starters, but Russell was seemingly impervious to such impediments. Recording the fourth fastest time of **2:02:30**, his 5 mile splits were 41:10, 41:16 and 40:04, with a final mile of 7:42.

Rather than walk in the Junior 6 Miles Walk at the annual LBG Carnival in Canberra in June, Russell opted to contest the 20 Miles Classic, coming 8th (42 starters, 34 finishers) with a time of **3:00:37**. Two weeks later, he contested the Victorian Open 20km Championship, coming 5th with **1:42:27**. In mid July, he reduced his 20km time to **1:41:48** and finally in the 1972 Olympic 20km trial, held in Melbourne on Saturday 18th September 1971, he recorded a time of **1:40:50** in finishing 7th. He also recorded a very impressive 10 Mile walk time of **1:18:42** in late July.

Continuing to explore the longer distances, he took silver behind Ted Allsopp in the Victorian 30km Championship in July (**2:36:02**) and third behind Ted Allsopp and Bob Gardiner in the Victorian 50km Championship in late August (**4:42:00**).

Bear in mind that he contested the 1971 winter season at 15 years of age!

It was not surprising that he was named as captain of the Victorian team for the Shell East Coast Sub-Junior meet to be held in Sydney on 15-16 January 1972. And of course he won!

The 1972 Victorian Open 3000m Track Walk Championship the next month saw him fighting out the medals with Ross Haywood and Bob Gardiner, Russell eventually taking third with **13:21** in a tightly contested race.

The racewalking world was seemingly at his feet. Yet, when he fronted for the 1972 winter season, his heart did not seem to be in it and his times were slower than the previous year. After a couple of races, he disappeared off the scene.

The only photo I have of Russell is one taken on 11th January 1972, just after his 16th birthday (see below).



Russell returned briefly in 1974 to win the Victorian 30km Championship. At that stage, he was living in a share house in inner Melbourne and decided to whip himself into shape for the title. As I was living in North Fitzroy at the time, I arranged to do a couple of long walks with him. He completed them effortlessly, then won the title with a time of **2:34:15** (I was second with 2:40:45).

He then disappeared again, never to return to racewalking. He had his Victorian Open gold, silver and bronze medals, along with a number of wins nationally at the junior level. That seemed to be sufficient for him.

A brilliant future had been predicted for him, but it was not to be. He had dropped out of school and gone his own way.

It came as a great shock to us all to hear of his untimely death, the victim of a fatal accident while riding his motorcycle near his home in July 1977. He was aged only 21 years.

Tim Erickson
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