

A. O. BARRETT – VICTORIA'S FIRST CHAMPION WALKER

Arthur Octavius (Artie or AO) Barrett stands as a giant amongst the early walkers in Victoria. Born in 1870 in England and coming to Australia at a young age, he was here to witness the first athletics clubs (Melbourne Harriers and Melbourne University) formed in Melbourne in 1890. Further clubs (Hawthorn Harriers, Wesley College and Melbourne Church of England Grammar School) quickly followed in 1891 and these five clubs became the Victorian Amateur Athletic Association on the 8th October 1891 (six years before the formation of the Amateur Athletics Association of Australia in Oct 1897). Other clubs were quick to form, including the Melburnian Hare and Hounds of which he became a member.

The first Track and Field Championships were conducted on the East Melbourne Cricket Ground in 1892 and, at the age of 22, he won the inaugural 1 and 3 mile walks. In 1893, he repeated his win in the 3 mile walk and was second in the 1 mile walk. In 1894, he set a new Victorian 5 mile walk record of **40:30**, a time which stood for many years.

Being elated with his dual success, he said his "youthful whiskers fairly swept the sky"ⁱ and he became most enthusiastic about the formation of a club for race walkers. Eventually he gathered together a few of his athletically-minded friends and, on Friday 26th October 1894, a meeting was held at the Port Phillip Club Hotel in Flinders Street.

The club would differ from the many other athletic groups by having much broader objectives. Not only would its members walk – as in track racing – they would also tour or, in modern terms, go bushwalking. Barrett's proposal met with unanimous approval; the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club was formed. In accordance with the social conventions of the times, nobody queried that it was for men only.

The first race conducted by the new club was held on Sunday 25th November 1894, starting at St. Kilda at 11am., and finishing at Brighton, "or as the members wish".

To get some idea of Melbourne at the time, you have only to read his breezy article detailing his 1893 walk from Melbourne to Sorrento.ⁱⁱ

On the afternoon of 25th January, 1893, I was standing on Princes Bridge in a highly disgruntled frame of mind, having missed the boat to Sorrento. The time was 2.40 p.m., and the temperature, 103 degrees in the shade. Suddenly the thought struck me, "The earth is flat, and I am on the surface of it. It is only 40 miles, and, if I walk along the beach, I will be there by 11 p.m.! Why not? But, before I start, I must let them know at home where I am going." Thrilled with the idea, I set off along Batman Avenue to the Richmond malthouse, where I lived, and told a carpenter, Jack Goyder, about it. He gaped - he knew; I didn't. The time was then 3 p.m.

Proceeding along Church Street and Chapel Street, I arrived at the Elsternwick Hotel, where I asked a man the way. He told me, and off I went, arriving at the Mordialloc Hotel at 5.40 p.m., where I had a good wash and drank a gallon of water. Again I inquired the way, and, at 6.50 p.m., I got to the old Carrum Hotel. On going into the dining room, there was "Peggy" Miles, my old schoolmaster of Melbourne Grammar. He cross-examined me about my doings. Hearing of my proposal, he exclaimed, "But, 'Silky' (my old nickname at school), it is still 40 miles to Sorrento." This was a body blow to me. However, I drank two bottles of beer and ate the inside of an apple pie (I would not eat solids), and then commenced to ruminate. As "Peggy" Miles had told me the way, off I went again, leaving the hotel at 7.55 p.m. At first I was a bit stiff, but the stiffness wore off, and I got to Frankston at 8.50 p.m. Going up the hill out of Frankston, a terrible thing happened to me - a bad blister developed on my heel; so I stamped on it, when the pain was so "exquisite" and, marvellous to relate, I became completely refreshed.

It then got dark, and I could see only by gazing up between the overhanging trees, where there was a glimmer of light. As far as I was concerned, the moon set at 10.40 p.m., and along that part of the road I had two bad falls on heaps of stone. However, it was no use lying there, luxurious as it seemed! Having been told to go straight on and turn neither to the left nor to the right, I obeyed instructions, and in time went down a long hill to what I now know to be Balcombe Creek. There was no water in the creek, and I was beginning to feel very thirsty. Crawling up a hill (Mt. Martha), which seemed miles long, I came to a stone house, with two water tanks fitted with taps, but two fierce dogs barred the way. So on I went, down again, and at the bottom of Mt. Martha was another creek; this time only mud. Then I was done; no sound of the sea and nearly dead with thirst - I was lost.

Suddenly I heard the click of horses' hoofs on the road and a few minutes later up came a buggy with two horses. "Stop," I cried. "I am lost. Come back and tell me where I am." The buggy stopped and two men got out and came towards me. "Great Scot," said one "it is Silky." They were Davy and Bert

Nicholson, old school mates. They got the truth out of me, and, when that was over, I said I wanted some water. They had none, but Davy said, "I have a bottle of claret," and he gave it to me. Sitting in the buggy was another acquaintance, Miss Bluebell Stapleton, and she said, "Artie, I have a bottle of milk." I accepted the milk, and drank it straight away.

Having told me the way, they went on. Refreshed, I reached Dromana at 1.45 a.m., and went past the Rosebud lighthouse doing "six knots." I was now "full of beans," and it was not until dawn that famine intervened and some weakness came. When it is pitch dark and one cannot see more than a few yards ahead, there is nothing to be apprehensive about, but when the road shows up a mile ahead, a distance becomes alarming, because a mile is 1760 yards, and that means 1760 steps, and each step an effort. Then came some corners and little hills - they didn't help. "Surely Sorrento must appear soon," I thought - and it did. Around a corner, there were the baths and the pier. I had done it! Overcome, I staggered up to a cow which was lying on the road. As I approached, the cow got up, and I lay where it had been lying. It was hot and lovely! The time was 4.45 a.m. I stayed in that spot until 5.30 a.m., and, when I went to get up, I was so stiff that I almost failed to hold my balance. Then a humorous incident occurred; a venerable old man approached me and, clutching at my coat labels, he began to pray. He said, "Oh, young man, turn from your evil ways. Seek the Lord. You have been out drinking and lying drunk on the road. You will run your life. What a shame to see a young man like this. Kneel and let us pray." "Let me go," I exclaimed, "I have just walked down here from Melbourne." It was his turn to gasp, as I left him and went on my way. And that is how my walking began.

In 1893 with the sport well established in NSW, Victoria and New Zealand, the three Amateur Athletic Associations had entered into a memorandum of understanding to hold Australasian Championships every 2 years. The first such event had been held in Melbourne in November 1893 and he won the 3 mile walk in **24:00.2**.



A. O. Barrett, Esq, Founder of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club, circa 1930

The second carnival was held in Christchurch in New Zealand in January 1896 and Barrett, as undisputed Victorian champion, made the trip across the Tasman. There he was soundly beaten by New Zealander Francis Creaner who won both walks in convincing style. Up till that time, Barrett had struggled to break 7 minutes for the mile but Creaner's graceful rhythmic style was a revelation to him and he came home determined to emulate it. Soon he was flowing with new found speed and his Victorian title wins that year set new Australasian records of **6:42.0** and **21:36.2** respectively.

In the next Australasian Championship meet in Sydney in 1897, he was 2nd in the 1 mile walk, 1 yard behind the New Zealand winner Dave Wilson who recorded 6:41.5 to break his Australasian record. Over the next few years, Wilson remained the dominant Australasian walker and lowered the 1 mile record further to 6:38.2 but Barrett's 3 mile record remained intact. On the Australian front, Barrett and fellow Victorian Reg Purbrick were the dominant walkersⁱⁱⁱ but it was not until 1904 that he could reverse the tables and win further Australasian titles.

By now, he was already heavily involved in administrative fields. He was the inaugural club secretary of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club from 1894-95 and assumed the Vice-Presidency position in 1899 (he went on to hold this position till 1918). He was also a key figure in the new VAAA and soon realized that walking needed formal rules. Together with R. H. Croll, he submitted these propositions to the Australasian Convention of all the amateur associations in Auckland in 1900. They were there adopted as the formal rules governing racewalking.

1. *That a racing walker must have contact with the ground with one foot during a stride, and with both feet at the end of a stride.*
2. *That the heel of the front foot must touch the ground before the back foot leaves it.*
3. *That as the heel of the front foot touches the ground the leg must not be bent, its knee must be locked.*
4. *That the body and head must be kept upright* ^{iv}

These rules stayed in effect in Australia for the next 55 years and the current racewalking rules have changed little in essence from this initial interpretation.

He was awarded life membership of VAAA in 1904, the same year he won the Australasian championship 1 and 3 mile walks. His times of **6:43.8** and **22:53.6** were still competitive even though he was 34 years old and now an administrator first and an athlete second.

He officially retired as an athlete in 1905 and was awarded the position of chief walking judge by the Council of the VAAA. In this and various other capacities, he continued in the sport as an administrator for many years and earned further life memberships of the Melbourne Amateur Walking and Touring Club (1918) and the Melburnian Hare and Hounds Club.

Eventually in 1947 at 77 years of age, he published a pamphlet called *Racing Walking Practical Hints* ^v. This book contained his thoughts on racewalking (or *racing walking* as he called it), distilled and crystallized over many years. The following small quote gives some idea of the man and his perceptive insights into the sport. ^{vi}

On being appointed judge by the Council of the V.A.A.A. after my retirement from racing in 1905, I found myself in a quandary, having never seen a race before. When a multitude of walkers started off it became perplexing to pick out the sheep from the goats, so something had to be invented speedily to prevent the field getting out of hand. The solution came, and it was as follows: Watch a heel, a knee, a leg, a body - do not try to look at the whole of the frame of a walker at once. By this means judging is simplified.

Here I would like to say that in my opinion judging would be easier if spiked shoes were banned in walking races. They tend to produce a lift off the back foot in order that the spikes shall not drag along the surface of the track, and this produces a movement so near to a run as disgusts me and brings derision from the spectators. In addition, they must surely prevent the necessary swivel on the ball of the back toe and so reduce the length of the stride. Jog trot results.

His 13 Victorian championship gold medals make him one of the most prolific champions in local racewalking history and his 8 Australasian medals cement his place in Australian athletics history.

VICTORIAN TRACK CHAMPIONSHIP RESULTS

1892	1 mile	1 st	7.55	3 miles	1 st	24.00.2
1893	1 mile	2 nd		3 miles	1 st	24.00.2
1894	1 mile	1 st	7.31.2	3 miles	1 st	24.11.4
1895	1 mile	1 st	7.02.5	3 miles	1 st	23.17.2
1896	1 mile	1 st	6.42.0 (Aust. Rec.)	3 miles	1 st	21.36.2 (Aust. Rec.)
1897	1 mile	1 st	6.47.8			
1900				3 miles	1 st	
1903	1 mile	1 st	7.05.2	3 miles	1 st	24.41.0

AUSTRALASIAN TRACK CHAMPIONSHIP RESULTS

1893	Melbourne	1 mile	unplaced	3 miles	1 st	24:00.2
1896	Christchurch	1 mile	3 rd	3 miles	3 rd	
1897	Sydney	1 mile	2 nd	6:42		
1901	Auckland	1 mile	2 nd	3 miles	2 nd	
1904	Melbourne	1 mile	1 st	6:43.8	3 miles	1 st 22:53.6

But like his great mate R. H. Croll, he was involved in many activities apart from those pertaining to sport and fitness. Along with Croll's books, the Victorian State Library houses some of Barrett's books. These titles give a slight insight into the prolific outpourings of the man.

- *Australia's entail* by A. O. Barrett, (Melbourne: Roberson & Mullins, 1937)
- *The necessity for mature and over-mature Australian eucalypts on Australian watersheds* by A. O. Barrett, (Melbourne: Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, 1935)

- *The essential eucalypts and their effects on the soil of Australia* by A. O. Barrett, (Melbourne : Robertson & Mullens, 1945)

A newspaper clipping of the times gives the following review of his book *Australia's entrail* ^{vii}

It has been left to an amateur botanist to give us what surely must be the most thrillingly romantic work ever written on trees in general and gum trees in particular. Mr A. O. Barrett, prominent Victorian and great lover of nature, has put a lifetime of experience with trees and their habits into a book. "Australia's Entails" is the title. Apart from its purely romantic side, it is a valuable addition to our tree knowledge and a convincing sermon on the preservation of our flora. His observations began in England as a child and were continued in Australia, the land of his adoption. One of his final convictions is: "Gum trees are like good words: they never die."

ⁱ *My Walk to Sorrento* by A. O. Barrett, (The Melbourne Walker Diamond Jubilee Issue, Volume 25, 1954) p 4

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, pp40-41

ⁱⁱⁱ *Fields of Green, Lanes of Gold* by Paul Jenes (Payright Publishing, Sydney, 2001) p 32

^{iv} *Racing Walking Practical Hints* by A. O. Barrett (Robertson and Mullens, Melbourne, 1947) p 3

^v *Racing Walking Practical Hints* by A. O. Barrett (Robertson and Mullens, Melbourne, 1947)

^{vi} *Ibid*, p 20

^{vii} From the archives and press cuttings of Bert Gardiner