

THE EARLY HISTORY OF WOMEN'S RACEWALKING IN AUSTRALIA: UP TILL 1940

I am indebted to Athletics Australian statistician **Paul Jenes** for much of the information in this potted history of the early Australasian Track and Field Championships. His monumental tome *Fields of Green Lanes of Gold*¹, published in 2001, tells the story in great detail. My short piece focuses on the racewalks and tries to place them in the wider context.

All results are taken from the website *A History of Athletics in Australia*,² compiled by and maintained by Paul Jenes, Peter Hamilton, David Tarbotton, Fletcher McEwen.

The International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) was founded in 1912 by 17 national athletic federations who saw the need for a governing authority, for an athletic programme, for standardised technical equipment and world records. The IAAF was quick to embrace men's athletics but they dragged their feet with regard to including women.

It was not until 1921 that the IAAF held an international track and field meeting in Monte Carlo for women. This was followed a few months later by the formation of the Federation Sportive Feminine Internationale and the first women's international match was held in Paris between France and Britain. In 1922, the Women's Amateur Athletic Association was formed in Britain and its inaugural championships were held in 1923.

When the modern Olympics were first held in 1896, women had not been allowed to compete, and it was not until 1922 that a first World Games for women (deemed a "Women's Olympics") was held in Paris in 1922. Women would have to wait until 1928 to get their own spot in the Olympics and women racewalkers would have to wait until 1992 before they could compete at an Olympic level.

The Australian Amateur Athletic Union has been asked by the IAAF to take charge of women's athletics, but it was not until 1926 that any form of official women's athletics took place in Australia and that was due to the NSW men's association which included women's events in their 1926 state championships. This was driven by the inclusion of women's athletics in the 1928 Olympics - Australian women needed some sort of official competition to prepare.

This slow acceptance of women's athletics in Australia is unusual, given the success of Australian swimmers Fanny Durack and Mina Wylie in the 1912 Olympics. The stage had been set, women could compete with distinction on the world stage.

The general attitude of the male-dominated society in Australia was not conducive to women's athletics. Many people felt that women would develop muscles and become unfeminine, even masculine. Women were actively discouraged from participating in sport. Nevertheless, there was no stopping the women and by 1928 three women's clubs had affiliated with the NSWAAA as part of men's clubs - Botany, Kensington and St George. In 1929, women's inter-club competition began in Sydney.

South Australia, Queensland and Victoria women also formed their own associations around this time. But it was not always easy. Early in 1929 a delegate from Glenhantly AAC in Victoria moved that women's events be included in the state championships. The male delegates were shocked and the motion was soundly defeated. The women went their own way, forming the Victorian Women's Amateur Athletic Association (VWAAA) in December 1929. When the women's association tried to affiliate with the men, they were refused on the grounds that they would flourish better on their own. This resulted in Victorian men and women competing in separate associations until the late 1970's when they were finally amalgamated.

The 1930 Australian National Championships in Melbourne were the first without New Zealand and included 3 women's events - 100 yards, 80 yards hurdles and high jump. The 1932 Australian National Championships in Sydney also included a variety of events for women - 100 yards, 220 yards (invitation), 90 yards hurdles, high jump and 4x110 yards relay (invitation).

The 1930/31 season saw the start of inter-club for women in Victoria at 3 venues - Williamstown and Glenhantly Cricket Grounds and the Royal Showgrounds. It was not until 1936 the the VWAAA was able to get Royal Park from the Melbourne City Council. By 1939 they had a proper cinder track and dressing accommodation there and they competed at that venue until the merger with the men in the late 1970s.

Nationally, the women went their own way, forming the Australian Women's Amateur Athletic Union (AWAAA) in 1932 and taking control of their own destiny. One could write a separate chapter about the prejudices and

1 *Fields of green, lanes of gold : the story of athletics in Australia* / Paul Jenes, Caringbah, N.S.W. : Playright Publishing, 2001

2 See https://athletics.possumbilly.com/aust_tf/index.htm

discriminations that women were forced to face and overcome in their struggle for athletics equality. Suffice it to say, they did overcome them!

Australian Womens Championships 1932-33 Amateur Sports Ground, Melbourne, 23 & 25 March 1933

One of the AWAAA's first tasks was to organise inaugural Australian Women's Track and Field Championships, which were held in Melbourne in March 1933. Now with a free rein, the program was much more comprehensive – 100 yards, 220 yards, 440 yards, 880 yards, 90 yards hurdles, 880 yards walk, high jump, long jump, shot put, discus, javelin and 4x110 yards relay. Entries were small and the cost of travel and time from work during the Depression made it hard for athletes to participate. Nevertheless, the full program was completed, with Victoria and NSW winning five events each.

An 880 yards walk was included on the program and was won by [Mabel Moad](#), a tennis player who had joined Malvern Harriers more for fitness and who had entered a walk as a joke. However, she found she had ability at this event and started to train seriously for it. She finished second in the next three national championships and also won four Victorian track walk titles. She later married well known Victorian athlete and official [Alf Robinson](#) and together they committed a lifetime to athletics. She became president of both the State Association and the National Women's Union from 1962 until amalgamation in 1978. Both she and her husband Alf are life members of the Victorian Race Walking Club, as well as many other organisations. They remain two of the giants of Australian athletics.

880 YARDS WALK - Women - Saturday 25 March 1933

1	Mabel Moad	VIC	4:00.3
2	Phyllis Hicks	SA	4:04.0
3	Edie Smith	NSW	4:07.0
4	Elsie Edwards	VIC	4:12.0
5	Emily Neville	VIC	4:12.2
6	Nora Pierce	SA	4:20.0
	Dot Donaldson	NSW	DQ
	Dot Wiltshire	SA	DQ



Mabel Moad competing in the Victorian colours in the early 1930s. She was generally regarded as a near perfect stylist (photo Paul Jeness, Fields of Green, Lanes of Gold)

Mabel's winning 880 yards time of 4:00.3 was granted the status of an inaugural Australian record. However, she may well have heard of young Sydney based prodigy [Lorna Carrington](#) who had been regularly breaking 4 minutes for the 880 yards walks over the previous few years. Lorna had won the 1933 NSW Women's T&F Championships 440 yards walk in a State record of 1:40.3 in February but did not travel to Melbourne for the inaugural Australian Women's Championships the following month.

Australian Women's Track & Field Championships 1934-35
Lang Park, Brisbane, Queensland, 24, 26, 27 April 1935

Lorna Carrington and Mabel Moad finally met in competition at the 1935 Australian Women's Track & Field Championships in Brisbane, and it was Lorna who won out, her winning time of 3:49.0 noted in the papers as the best known time done anywhere in the world. Mabel also bettered her 1933 winning time when finishing second with 3:55.4.

880 YARDS WALK - Women - Saturday 27 April 1935			
1	Lorna Carrington	NSW	3:49.0
2	Mabel Moad	VIC	3:55.4
3	Elsie Edwards	VIC	



Lorna Carrington on the left – competing in 1929 (photo Penrith City Council)

Australian Women's Track & Field Championships 1935-36
Rushcutters Bay Oval 15 January, Sydney Sports Ground, 17 & 18 January 1936

Positions were the same in the 1936 Australian Women's Championships 880 yards walk in Sydney, with Lorna beating Mabel by just 2.5 yards, with a time of 3:59.2. One of the major problems trying to track down performances in these early races was the practice of only timing the winner. This was the norm, not only in club events but also in championships and did not change for club events until the 1970s.

This would be Lorna's last championship as she married later that year and soon started a family.

880 YARDS WALK - Women - Saturday 18 January 1936			
1	Lorna Carrington	NSW	3:59.2
2	Mabel Moad	VIC	2.5 yards
3	Edith Campbell	NSW	
	Thelma Allison	QLD	
	E.Sayers	NSW	
	Clare Smith	QLD	

Australian Women's Track & Field Championships 1937-38
Royal Park, Melbourne, 8, 9, 11 December 1937

With Lorna Carrington off the scene, Mabel might have expected to win the 1937 Australian Women's 880 yards walk in Melbourne, but she was beaten by fellow Victorian **Maisie James**, who won with a creditable 3:55.3. Maisie would go on to win the 1937-1939 Victorian 880 yards walks, with a best time of 3:48.6 recorded in 1938.

880 YARDS WALK - Women - Saturday 11 December 1937			
1	Maisie James	VIC	3:55.3
2	Mabel Moad	VIC	

3	Jill Bond	VIC	
	Edith Campbell	NSW	DQ
	Ada Tanner	NSW	DQ

**Australian Women's Track & Field Championships 1939-40
Leederville Oval, Perth, 7, 9, 11 March 1940**

In February 1940, it was reported that Lorna Carrington had died as a result of complications associated with the recent birth of her third child. With this dampener on proceedings, the Championships went ahead. With Mabel Moad now retired, the title was up for grabs and **Iris Dowsey** of Collingwood Harriers was up to the task. She also won the 1940-1942 Victorian 880 yards walk titles but had not further chance of competing nationally, with the Second World War about to take centre stage.

880 YARDS WALK - Women - Saturday 9 March 1940			
1	Iris Dowsey	VIC	3:53.5
2	Elsie Capel	VIC	
3	Jean Gullan	WA	
	Phyllis Howe	WA	
	Emma Clifford	WA	

Tim Erickson
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