

A flight of fancy-What might have been

By Mark Wall

It is always a problem when you wake at 5-30am and your mind latches on to a thought. Worse still are the ‘what would have happened if...?’ type thoughts.

The ‘what if’ in this case was, ‘What would the Australian teams have looked like if we had contested the Lugano Cup from the first available opportunity?’ A secondary question, but none less important is, ‘What difference would it have made to the individual athlete’s careers and the landscape of the discipline?’

First a bit of background. What we know as the World Athletics Race Walking Team Championships, was initially called the Lugano Cup (after the venue of the first event). It was a men’s only contest until 1979. In that year, the Eschborn Cup for women (5km) was added. At the previous two iterations, there were invitation events for women also over 5km. VRWC walker Sheila Miller finished 13th in 1977. It was a teams’ event with 3 to count in each event. Until 1967 it was a purely European event.

Except for the inaugural year, European teams went through qualifying rounds (the most successful teams from the previous competition and later the hosts were exempt). In 1971, USA and South Africa entered (South Africa did not start for perhaps political reasons). Non-European teams such as the USA and Canada contested subsequent events. The venues and team sizes were:

• 1961	Lugano	Switzerland	3 to count in each event
• 1963	Varese	Italy	3 to count in each event
• 1965	Pescara	Italy	3 to count in each event
• 1967	Bad Saarow	East Germany	3 to count in each event
• 1970	Eschborn	West Germany	4 to count in each event
• 1973	Lugano	Switzerland	4 to count in each event
• 1975	Grand-Quevilly	France	4 to count in each event
• 1977	Milton Keynes	United Kingdom	4 to count in each event

Being a selector can at times be a ‘mug’s game’. You will never get it right. I know that all too well from the decade plus I spent as a state selector. Worse still, when you are looking back in time and to circumstances that could have been markedly different to what you are trying to imagine!

In picking these notional teams, I relied on National Championships (logical trials), national rankings over the two-year cycle involved, personal recollections and most dangerously, perhaps, gut instinct.

I can well imagine, those with a longer memory, a longer period in the event or access to further results, can challenge my prognostications. It makes for a good talking point anyway. Of course, some of my nominations will have chosen either an alternate distance or would not have been available.

1967, Bad Saarow, East Germany (3 in each event)

20km	50km
Frank Clark NSW	Bob GardinerVIC
Ross Haywood VIC	Ted AllsoppVIC
Peter McCullagh NSW	Noel Norris QLD

An obvious absence is Noel Freeman. If this opportunity had existed, would he have contested the 1967 season. Harry Summers had a 4th place in the 1966 50km championship so would have been a logical reserve. Ross, 12th in the 1976 Olympics made his international debut at the 1974 Commonwealth Games. In 1967 he was 20 years of age, so a good development opportunity. Subsequent years were devoted to a successful running career.

Dr. Peter McCullagh never won Australian selection but whilst a student at Oxford, became the first Australian to win a AAA (English) title, in his case the 10 mile. Noel Norris equally was never to make a national team.

1970, Eschborn, West Germany (4 in each event)

20km	50km
Noel Freeman VIC	Bob GardinerVIC
Graeme Nicholls VIC	Ted AllsoppVIC
Frank Clark NSW	Peter Fullager SA

Athol Jones NSW

Steve Hausfield NSW

The 18-year-old Steve Hausfield could have made either team - he was 4th in the 1970 50km Championship (he did compete later in his career in 1987). The late Graeme Nicholls was never to make an Australian team. Peter Fullager made his Lugano Cup debut in 1965, with a 4th place competing for the UK. At this stage he may not have been eligible to compete for Australia but was to win selection in later years. Norm Marr (Vic) or Robin Whyte (NSW/ACT) would be the likely replacements. Athol Jones had his best year.

1973, Lugano, Switzerland (4 in each event)

20km

Peter Fullager SA
Ross Haywood VIC
Graeme Nicholls VIC
Steve Hausfield NSW

50km

Robin Whyte NSW
Clarrie JackVIC
Robin WoodVIC
Ian Hodgkinson WA

Second selections for the 20km team, albeit at alternative distances. Fullager, Hodgkinson and Haywood were the 1974 Commonwealth Games team. Ian Hodgkinson also contested the 1970 Games, that time for the Isle of Man. Clarrie was to win an Australian vest at 20km against New Zealand in Brisbane in 1977. The first 3 places in the 50km have gone to the placings in the AAU title that year. For Robin Wood, what could have been after such an opportunity?

1975, Grand-Quevilly, France (4 in each event)

20km

Peter Fullager SA
Ross Haywood VIC
Bill Cullen VIC
Paul Nugent VIC

50km

Tim EricksonVIC
Clarrie JackVIC
Jim HendersonVIC
Peter VysmaVIC

The late Jim Henderson was one of those walkers who was thereabouts for years. He and Peter Vysma crossed the line together in the AAU title in Perth, but the judges split them. So, logic dictates I would go with the four from that one race. Bill Cullen and Paul Nugent had parallel junior careers. Bill had a great campaign trying to make the 1976 Olympic team and made massive improvements. He then disappeared. As I recall, his drinks business consumed his time. Paul was the wunderkind of the period but as he took up his teaching career, as the decade progressed, he lost motivation. He was my gut instinct pick, he had the times to his name, however.

Paul (1973) and his successor as the AAU Junior Champion, Graham Dent (1974) were both training partners of Ross Hayward in his lead up to the 1976 Games. So this was very much an era of what may have been? Would opportunities have kept these guys in the discipline. In Graham's case, glandular fever and other illness coupled with over-training may have cost him. I guess at this point I need to declare a direct connection, Paul and Graham were clubmates of mine but more importantly, Graham and I were together at school, even sharing an academic prize in 1973.

Interestingly, both Paul and Bill had younger brothers who made a mark in the sub-junior (Under 17) and Junior (under 19) age groups.

1977, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom (4 in each event)

20km

Peter Fullager SA
Ross Haywood VIC
David Smith VIC
Clarrie Jack VIC

50km

Willi SawallVIC
Tim EricksonVIC
Peter VysmaVIC
Robin Whyte NSW

This one did take a bit of 'gut instinct' selection. The 50km team mirrors the 1976 World Championship team, Peter Vysma narrowly missing selection, and all keeping their form into 1977. That was an easier selection. The result of the 1977 50km Championship saw Willi, Tim and Peter make the podium. The late Tim Thompson took 4th, narrowly beating Robin and Clarrie. This was a race where he was able to seize his opportunity.

Clarrie could have secured selection in either event as Willi, Tim, Peter, and Clarrie all represented Australia against NZ that year. The reserve for the team was a resurgent Frank Clark. Ross scaled back on competition but after a great 1976, I believe he may have saddled up for another throw of the dice. He would have been a real addition.

Would we have retained some of the young talent we lost over the two decades? Would someone like Steve Hausfield have remained engaged rather than trying his hand at other events? Would Ross have remained in walking following his early success? He was able to achieve elsewhere in athletics before his refocus on walks. Would he have stayed in the discipline longer, even into the early 1980s? He was still only 32 in 1979. Would we have seen other walkers step up and seize such an opportunity?

Women

As I said these were invitation events, so there was no limitation on numbers. For my flight of fancy, I have gone with the male pattern and the number used in the first official event. These two team selections see two or three who did go on to gain international selection but even then, the late 1970s and into the 1980s, opportunities were limited at the highest level without races for females at major games.

1975, Grand-Quevilly, France (4 in each event) (ages in brackets)

Lilian Harpur	SA	(37)
Bev Wilkins (Hayman)	NSW	(15)
Rachel Thompson	NSW	(13)
Anne (Pembroke) Manning	NSW	(15)

This team would speak to the flux in women's walking at the time. At one end you had the tough competitive instincts of Lilian Harpur, a woman before her time, a story of opportunities denied. At the other extreme you had the inimitable Rachel Thompson who at 13 took medals at senior level. Anne Manning as a 14-year-old won a national senior title in 1974. Bev and Anne (Olympian and a Commonwealth Games silver) were to go on to appear on the world stage in major championships, Rachel appeared at a World Cup in 1983. I doubt the AWAAU would have allowed a team this young to compete, however.

1977, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom (4 in each event)

Sue (Orr) Cook	VIC	(19)
Lilian Harpur	SA	(39)
Rachel Thompson	NSW	(15)
Frances Burke	NSW	

Sue had now well and truly broken through on the National scene but despite her longevity, the Olympics came too late in her career. Frances Burke like many had that truncated career. She was still a junior in 1977. The best Victorian example of this was Kerri Neville.

So, there you have it. Some may have had an extended international career; some may have turned opportunities to a greater advantage. For others it may have been a just reward for service to the discipline.

Cost would always have been an issue. For the 1979 team to go away, there was a lot of sacrifices made.

We will never know, I guess that is all part of the musings. 'What ifs', have never helped anyone.

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