

AUSTRALIA'S RACEWALKING NATIONAL EVENT COACHES

The Australian Track & Field Coaches Association (AT&FCA) was founded in 1974 as an association to which all interested in coaching track and field athletics could belong. Much has flowered from this humble beginning.

The idea of National Coaches / National Squads came out of a report on the future development of athletics in Australia, written by members of the AT&FCA Victorian Branch (including Norm Osborne, Fred Graf, John Boas, Dot Walke and Henri Schubert) and adopted in principle by the Australian Amateur Athletic Union (AAAU) at its Hobart Conference in March 1977.

The seed had been planted but it was not until Alan McDonald and Rick Pannell took over as President and Secretary of the AAAU in March 1978 that the particulars began to take shape. Dr Jean Roberts was appointed as the inaugural AAAU Coaching and Technical Director in March 1979 with the specific mandate to develop a comprehensive national coaching structure.

Her first step was to facilitate the creation of the AAU Alcoa National Squad as a long range program for improving Australia's athletic performance. A two year sponsorship by Alcoa was announced in June 1979 and over the next two years, the sport and the level of professional coaching blossomed in Australia. There were Alcoa Challenge Series track meets, coaching camps and an eventual extension of the AAU Alcoa National Squad to include leading junior athletes.

The appointment of National Event Coaches (NECs) was the result of a second report, this time by the Executive of AT&FCA (Jean Roberts, Marlene Mathews and John Daly), adopted in late 1979. Applications were called for new NEC positions, with most being announced at the 1980 National T&F Championships. The position of NEC for Walks, along with a number of other NEC positions, was not filled at that time. In particular, it was felt that none of the NEC Walks applicants had sufficient background understanding of the physiological aspects of the discipline to warrant appointment.

When an inaugural Alcoa Squad walks camp was to be scheduled in late 1980, **John Boas**, the Long Jump NEC who coached Gary Honey and Ian Campbell, was asked by Jean Roberts to run it and take on the job as acting NEC (Walks). John was a multi-discipline coach, specialising in the horizontal jumps but equally adept coaching athletes in disciplines as diverse as pole vaulting, distance running and walking (he was also my coach throughout my walking career).

The first Alcoa walks camp was held at the CAE in Ballarat and introduced us to John's scientific approach to the physiological basis of training and its integration with program planning and peaking. John subsequently led our 1981 Lugano/Eschborn Cup Australian team as Manager/Coach and ran a number of other successful walks camps.

Without wishing to insult the walks coaches of that era, most came at it from a technique/judging perspective and followed training recipes rather than designing training programs from an understanding of what was going on physiologically. Certainly, at the camps and at seminars, I hammered the importance of the physiology, which I like to think opened a lot of people's eyes.



John Boas discusses metabolic fitness testing results with Tim Erickson at the October 1980 camp in Melbourne

Part of his remit as acting NEC walks was to find/develop someone who could take over as NEC. By late 1981, John had found his man and recommended to Jean that Stan Malbut take over as NEC (Walks). Around that same time, Bruce Cook became a part-time AIS walks coach, a position he held until Craig Hilliard took over AIS walks coaching as one of his responsibilities.

Although John didn't have NEC (Walks) responsibilities after 1981, he continued to run sessions for walks coaches as part of the AT&FCA Level 2 course and had responsibility for the walkers at the 1984 Olympics and at the 1986 Commonwealth Games.

Stan Malbut, based in Adelaide and the coach of Peter Fullager, take over from John in 1981 and held the NEC (Walks) position for 4 years. Stan was an enthusiastic and gregarious NEC who travelled to all championships and who ran training camps in all States. When approached by any walker, he freely gave his time and expertise and, although lacking any proper funding, he badgered and cajoled AAU and AT&FCA for money to run camps and perform the role properly.



Tim Erickson with Stan and Shiela Malbut at the LBG Carnival in Canberra, June 2012

A former hurdler, **Craig Hilliard** had been appointed as an athletics coach with the Australian Institute of Sport in 1982. He was soon asked to take over the coaching of the AIS scholarship walkers and was subsequently appointed as NEC (Walks), taking over from Stan in 1985. Finally, racewalking in Australia had a properly funded and fully professional NEC. The list of Craig's walkers over the next 10 years reads impressively: Sue Cook, Kerry Saxby, David Smith, Simon Baker, Andrew Jachno, Nathan Deakes and Nick A'Hern, to name a few of the better known ones.



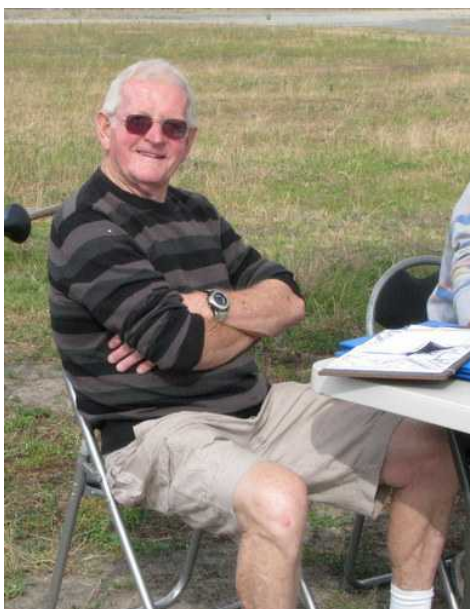
August 2010 – Craig Hilliard at the Australian Roadwalk Championships in Melbourne, talking with former international rep Craig Brill (still involved coaching walks after a coaching career of some 30 years)

By the late eighties, the NEC role had evolved to include responsibility for both coach education and athlete development. In the latter role, although they were not expected to be necessarily coaching the top performers, NECs were expected to be working with the coaches who were as part of the National Program.

Craig was so involved on the AIS front with his own scholarship athletes that the role of NEC (Walks) was passed to **Harry Summers**. Harry organised and led a number of yearly trips to Europe for developing walkers, ran a number of successful camps and was heavily involved in both AT&FCA and the wider walking community. When reflecting on his demanding time in the NEC role, Harry commented to me

I found it a frustrating job as there was no funding or assistance available. I was able to list all the Walks coaches from each state and did try to communicate with them. Craig Hilliard came to the rescue and I was able to organise a couple of camps at the AIS with their funding..

It was yet another case of a good concept on paper but a poorly designed one, done on a shoestring budget.



January 2011 – Harry Summers officiating at Middle Park – still going strong after nearly 60 years in the sport

In the mid nineties, Athletics Australia announced the separation of coach education and athlete performance roles. Coach education would be left to AT&FCA while high performance coaching was to be handled by salaried coaches. From now on, the NEC (Walks) would devolve by default to the AIS Walks Coach. Harry's days as NEC (Walks) were over. Craig now stepped back into the role as a stopgap, with Simon Baker as the assistant AIS walks coach.

In 1997, two interesting appointments were announced.

Firstly, former East German coach Ekkart Arbeit was announced as Athletics Australia head coach. Arbeit's appointment brought widespread criticism because of his role in administering performance-enhancing drugs to athletes in East Germany in the 1980s. The general public, sports people and Olympic officials alike, condemned Athletics Australia's decision to hire the former East German coach. Following this public outcry and the concern that his drug-stained past would reflect on our nation's athletes, the Federal Government reviewed his controversial appointment and it was recommended to Athletics Australia that Arbeit should go.

Secondly, and less controversially, former East German walker **Ron Weigel** was announced as the new AIS walks coach, taking over from Craig Hilliard who was now moving into a more senior role within the AIS coaching structure. Ron had wonderful credentials, with dual Olympic silver medals and both gold and silver at World Championship level.

Harry Summers now took on a new role as the National Walks Coach - Educational, working alongside Ron who took over the mantle as AIS Walks Coach.

Ron inherited a strong walks squad that included Nathan Deakes, Jane Saville, Luke Adams, Kerry Saxby, Dion Russell and Brent Vallance. He was an inspirational coach who regularly pushed his charges beyond their comfort zones, yet who inspired their confidence and commitment and produced the goods in terms of results.



Training in St Moritz in 1999 – Nathan Deakes, Ron Weigel (coach), Jane Saville and Dion Russell

It came as a surprise when Ron announced his resignation in early 2002, to return to Germany to take over from his previous trainer, Hans-Joachim Pathus, as the German national racewalks coach. He remains in that position as I write.

After Ron left, there was a significant period without a senior walks coach until eventually Canadian **John Fitzgerald** was appointed as the new AIS walks coach and took up residency in Canberra in May 2003. Former AIS scholarship holder and Australian international walker **Brent Vallance** also came on board as an AIS scholarship coach in June 2003.

Alas, John only filled his role for just over 12 months before suffering a life threatening health scare on 28th June 2004. He was in the weight room working with Jared Tallent when his aorta ruptured and he collapsed. He woke up in hospital 14 days later. His coaching days at an end, he returned home.

Sadly and unexpectedly, John passed away at his home in Canada on Saturday 27th October 2018, only a few weeks after being inducted into the Athletics Canada Hall of Fame.



August 2003 – John Fitzgerald with Simon Baker and Jill Huxley at the Australian roadwalk champs in Melbourne

Following John's departure, Brent took over full responsibility for the AIS walks program, coaching Nathan Deakes, Jared Tallent, Michael McCagh and Adam Rutter amongst others. It was under his guidance that Nathan won his bronze medal in the 2004 Olympic 20km final in Athens and Jared subsequently went on to become our greatest ever walker. Brent had been quickly thrown in the deep end and was the official 2004 Olympics Team Coach for racewalking.

In early 2005, Brent was formally confirmed in the ongoing role as AIS Athletics Coach - Race Walks. His job description read

To provide coaching to AIS Race Walkers, and to contribute to the overall development of the AIS Athletics program, which includes high quality training, support services, pastoral care and competition opportunities for scholarship holders.

In 2006, Brent took on the additional role of Athletics Australia Development Coordinator for the walking program, subsequently taking the Australian walks program to new heights. Taking teams overseas every year, organizing January training camps at the AIS or in Thredbo, taking on the training of or simply inviting our up and coming walkers to come to Canberra for a weekend or a week to train with 'the big boys', his enthusiasm and commitment never ceased to amaze me. He was highly sought after, both locally and overseas, as a presenter. And of course, he continued to coach our elite scholarship walkers Jared and Claire Tallent, Chris Erickson, Regan Lamble, Beki Lee, Rachel Tallent and Blake Steele, to name a few.



Brent Vallance with Jared Tallent at the 2009 LBG Carnival in Canberra

All through this period, Craig Hilliard, although no longer formally in the walks program, continued to coach a small number of elite walkers. In particular, he took over the role as Nathan Deakes' coach in 2005, a role that he fulfilled until Nathan retired after the 2012 Olympics.

Alas, it sometimes all seemed too good to be true and so it turned out, when the *Australia's Winning Edge* strategy was published by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) in 2012. The aim of this ambitious 10-year program was to restore Australia's sporting stature (apart from racewalking, our medal count had been slowly diminishing since 2000). One of its recommendations was a drastic restructuring of the AIS, a move that, for athletics, meant the end of what had been a wonderfully successful scholarship program.

The AIS scholarship program was wound down over the second half of 2012 and eventually terminated on 30th April 2013. Of course, by that stage, the AIS had already been emptied, with athletes and coaches thrown to the winds. Brent Vallance had already relocated to Melbourne to take up a position as the High Performance Manager at the Maribyrnong Sports Academy, Jared and Claire Tallent had already relocated to Adelaide, Chris Erickson had relocated to Melbourne, Nathan Deakes had retired and we were without a walks national coach. Indeed it was worse than that – we had completely lost any semblance of a walks program. Walkers were on their own once again, just like the good old 'amateur' days.

In all these comings and goings, Craig Hilliard proved himself the ultimate survivor. In 2013, he was appointed Athletics Australia Senior Athletics Coach and Mentor and, in December 2013, AA asked him to broaden his portfolio even further and take on a national coordination role for the walks program. In April 2015, he was appointed Australian Athletics Head Coach and had to step back from even this part time walks support.

Brent Vallance was one person who refused to quietly accept the dismantling of the walks program. From his base in Melbourne, he continued to coach a bevy of high level internationals, both from Australia and from overseas, and he continued to lobby Athletics Australia for some specific support of the walks program.

Eventually, his remonstrations bore fruit, he was able to re-institute the AIS summer camps of old, under the new Supernova badge and he was given a mandate as Australian Junior Coach (Walks).

It's a lot harder now for an Australian walker to become internationally competitive but at least people like Brent and Craig continue to work for that goal.

Overall, where do we stand on the world scene nowadays with regard to coaching structure and athlete support? Perhaps a 5 out of 10.

Oh for the good old days.

Tim Erickson
29th October 2018