

VALE PETER RYAN: - 1954 - 2000

On the morning of Friday 13th November 2020, I lost one of my dearest friends in the person of English racewalker Peter Ryan.

Although England based, Peter had travelled to Australia on many occasions and had attended the 2012 and 2014 Australian Summer 20km Championships in Hobart, participated in our 2014 VRWC Camp at Falls Creek and attended the 2018 LBG Carnival in Canberra with me. Hence he was known by many in the Victorian racewalking community and will be sadly missed by us.

He was born Charles Peter Ryan in Sheffield on 9th April 1954. He and twin brother Richard joined Sheffield United Harriers as youngsters, initially as middle distance runners. Richard was the more natural runner, achieving a time of 1:56 for the 800m as a 16 year old, so Peter turned his mind to racewalking.

Peter won the inaugural Northern Youth 3 Miles Walk Championship in 1970, with a time of 25:08. A week later he finished 4th in the National Youth 3 Miles Walk Championship behind Mick Holmes and Olly Flynn, the winner. Sheffield United triumphed in the teams race. His junior career was promising but not outstanding – he finished 4th on four separate occasions in national junior championships.

Peter had just joined South Yorkshire Police and was in his early twenties when Denis Sheppard told him he would be better off moving to Essex because he would get more support for his sporting activities from John Hedgethorpe. He promptly followed the advice and moved to Essex where he resided, off and on, for the rest of his life. He brought with him a loud voice with a Yorkshire accent and he ensured that everyone knew he was a proud Yorkshire man

Very tall (around 6 ft 4½ins), he would have cast an imposing figure when walking the beat, but in truth he was a gentle and caring person with a wicked sense of humour.

We first crossed paths in 1980 when I was based in London for the European summer and walking with Enfield Harriers. He was one of the up and coming young walkers in what was then a very strong local scene. We met again when our Australian Lugano Cup team was based in London for some weeks before the 1983 Championships. The photo below is my oldest photo of Peter, taken in a 10km race in Newmarket in September of that year.



September 1983 – 10km race at Newmarket – Peter is second from the left. Australians in the race photo include Duncan Knox, Bill Dyer, Sue Cook, Andrew Jachno and Sally Pierson

His best national finish was a gallant second in the 1982 British 50km Championship in Basildon, his time on that occasion a PB 4:18:30. He also spent time training with the Mexican walkers in Mexico City. Eventually his police career took priority and he left the sport for some 15 years before returning in the late 1990s and then achieving some excellent performances as a veteran on the UK and International stage. For instance, he was twice winner of the walking section of the Honolulu Marathon and broke 4 hours to win the walking section at the Berlin marathon.

One of his greatest performances was in 2003 when he participated in the annual English Centurions 100 Mile walk at Newmarket, London. It's said that he was coaxed out of retirement to do the race by his great friend Glyn Jones. With 50 laps of 2 miles around the racecourse, the venue proved to be a wonderful choice, with 72 walkers starting, 31 reaching the 100 mile mark and 17 new Centurions overall (4 Dutch, 3 Belgian and 10 British). The race was an exciting one, with Peter displaying all of his native Sheffield steel, leading for most of the way.

He had passed through 50 miles in 9:08:10, with a 23 minute lead over Sandra Brown and RWV Holland's William Mutze. Sandra dropped away in the second half of the race, leaving William as his nearest challenger, but he was still 23 minutes in arrears at 90 miles. Over the last ten miles Peter took a "right packet" (a term used in those days equivalent to "hitting the wall") and was prostrated on the grass at one point. But he rallied and the iconic photograph of him finishing captures not only the strain and pain, but the dogged determination that enabled him to hold off his Dutch rival by just 55 seconds, thus becoming C984, with a time of 19:57:35.



The 2003 English Centurions 100 Miler at Newmarket - Peter listing markedly as he walks the final few paces to the finish line, crossing as winner.

This win gained him international recognition, with selection in the English team for the Roubaix 28 Hours walk in France, thus following in the footsteps of his mentors, the two Johns; Eddershaw and Hedgethorpe.

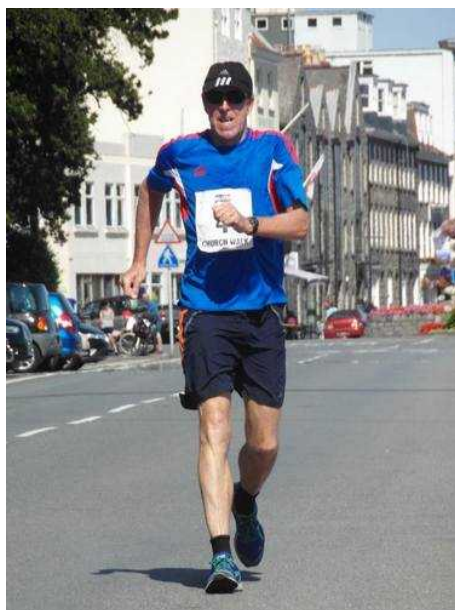
He now travelled widely as a Masters walker, his competitive spirit rekindled. In the 2005 European Veterans Championships in Portugal, he took silver in the M50 30km roadwalk with a time of 2:56:24. It was one of a number of Masters Championships in which he competed.

He was also a regular competitor in the Enfield League walks and in the Vets A.C. events. He also walked in the Surrey WC events and in the various classics around England. He was also a regular in the Ryan Cup (Police & Civil Service Race Walking Championships) and in the Church to Church event on Guernsey.

In 2014, he joined Fiona in his first parkrun and was soon hooked. Like many in the parkrun scene, he tried to visit as many parkruns as possible, working through the A to Z of place names initially and then amassing many more venues in an ever growing tally. His overseas trips were occasions for visiting new parkruns and meeting new people. A review of his profile in thepowerof10 website (<https://www.thepowerof10.info/athletes/profile.aspx?athleteid=21295>) shows just how many parkruns he ticked off each year.

He was an avid follower of elite athletics and travelled to all the major championships, be they Olympics, World Championships, Racewalking World Cups or European Championships. He was a seasoned world traveller who had done the Silk Road and explored destinations as far afield as South America and Oceania.

There are very few countries he has not visited. He normally combined his trips with a race or, in more recent times, a Park Run the last of which he completed in March this year.



Peter walking in the 2013 Guernsey Church to Church

Our paths continued to cross every few years – at the 2009 World Athletics Championships in Berlin, at the 2012 Olympics in London, at the 2017 World Athletics Championships in London and on other occasions in between. Lois and I stayed with him and Fiona in Horsell on more than one occasion and they stayed with us when visiting Melbourne.

Peter was known wherever he went and he was also warmly welcomed by his many friends, always pleased to see him. This photo, taken at the 2012 Olympics, is but one of a number in my collection.



Peter with Polish walker Bohdan Bulokowski at the London Olympics – they had spent time together training in Mexico as young walkers

Peter had suffered minor health problems for the past few years but this year his situation worsened. Eventually his tiredness was diagnosed as heart related – that wasn't the end of the world and could be treated. But in August, he was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer, a condition which was much more problematic.

His health deteriorated quickly and he was soon in hospital and eventually in palliative care in the Woking Hospice. The end came quickly. On his final night, he watched the football on television with his wife Fiona (he was a keen football follower) and, after going to sleep, failed to rise the next morning, having passed away peacefully during the night. He last days saw him greatly heartened by the receipt of so many messages, letters and cards.

The outpouring of comments on his death referred constantly to Peter as a great champion of our sport, a true gentleman and a kind-hearted, generous soul. No more need be said!

To Fiona, we offer our profound sympathy as the passing of a wonderful man.

Tim Erickson
Thursday 19th November 2020