

PETER VYSMA

Amongst the most well known figures at the Victorian Race Walking Club at Albert Park is racewalking judge and VRWC Committee member Peter Vysma.

Peter first came to Melbourne in the late 1960s. As a Officer Cadet in the airforce, he was posted to the Point Cook Airforce Base and started studying a Science Degree (aeronautics) at Melbourne University.

Naturally he joined Melbourne University Athletic Club (MUAC) and has been a member ever since. For a few years he did all the track events - until Jim Henderson suggested that he try the walk as it was the first event on the program and he was generally early for interclub. At that time MUAC had a number of top walkers - Jim, Gavin Breen, John Pottage and Jock O'Connell. Peter McCullough had been the top gun in the sixties but he moved over to England to pursue an academic career (via a Rhodes Scholarship) before Peter joined the club. Des O'Dwyer was the Melb Uni coach at the time.

Peter had immediate success - and it certainly helped to have have some of the best walkers to train with. Walking was not as well high profile as now and, being a little self conscious, he would only train on the track when the other walkers were in attendance. A lot has changed since then!

MUAC has continued with a steady stream of good walkers – Paul and Lisa Kennedy (Paul's sister), Sally Reid, Martin Richardson and Mark Dossetor spring to mind. While Peter has trained with them all, it was Jim Henderson who was undoubtedly his greatest influence.

Peter was introduced to the longer distances early in his walking career as the VAWC 40 km club championship was contested on a course from the Point Cook Airforce Base to Werribee South and return and it was Peter who was our local liason at the Airforce base. With Jim Henderson and Jock O'Connell and the others, he regularly competed in this event as well as in the various teams races on offer.



1978 Commonwealth Games Trial in Melbourne – Bill Dyer, Clarrie Jack, Bruce Cook and a young Peter Vysma

In 1975, Peter decided it was time to attempt the 50 km event and, with Jim Henderson, he embarked on some serious training. The Victorian selection trial was held at the Sandown race course (some 15 and half laps) in dreadful wintery conditions and Jim waited for Peter and kept him going. They finished together about 5 hours, enough to be selected in the Victorian team. It was a tough initiation into racewalking's longest event.

The 1975 Australian 50 km championship, held in Perth, is remembered for the torrential rain - walkers had to trudge through water, several cms deep at times. The attrition rate was high and Jim suffered cramps and urged Peter to leave him. To his credit, remembering Sandown, Peter decided to stay with Jim and help him through and they formed a pact to cross the line together - *“but I think that we made it too obvious what we were going to do. We crossed the line together with our arms over the others shoulders!. We were told that there was only one third place medal so they would only award one and the official results showed Jim as third and me as fourth.. Jim did not agree with the results and gave me the medal.”* Peter and Jim had crossed the line in a time of 4:47:21.

The next few years saw Peter medal in a number of Victorian and Australian championships. In particular, in the next

Australian 50 km championship in 1977, he won bronze in his own right with a PB time of 4:34:33. He also won his first Victorian championship in 1976, again over the 50 km distance, in 4:38:49

1976	Australian 20 km Championship	3 rd	1:41:28
1976	Victorian 50 km Championship	1 st	4:38:49
1977	Victorian 15 km Championship	2 nd	1:10.08
1977	Victorian 30 km Championship	3 rd	2:32.00
1977	Australian 50 km Championship	3 rd	4:34:33



Peter (far right) contests the 1978 Australian 20 km championship in Bendigo

As the 1970s drew to a close, Peter had to focus on his professional career and his walking diminished in priority. But he still continued to pop up with good performances as the following results show

1984	Victorian 50 km Championship	3 rd	4:40.21
1986	Victorian 30 km Championship	2 nd	2:42.54
1987	Australian 50 km Championship	3 rd	4:45:37
1988	Victorian 50 km Championship	3 rd	4:53.00

It was during this period that one of his career highlights occurred. In May 1985, he finished as the first MUAC walker in a Victorian Teams Championship. What to outsiders might have been a relatively minor event was of great significance to Peter, the consummate club man.

In the late 1980s, Peter had a re-occurrence of an old back injury and his competitive career looked over. It was not until the mid nineties that he was confident enough to try some longer events again and in 1995 he travelled to Canberra and finished 15th in the annual Lake Burley Griffin 20 Mile Championship in 3:03:08. In 1999, he travelled to Canberra for a second 20 Mile event, finishing 7th in 3:03:43. He thought he was on the cusp of a serious comeback - he had finally overcome his injuries and was starting to gain some real fitness and was walking about 23 minutes in training for the five km.

Fate deals some cruel blows and for Peter, it was not long in coming. A life threatening motor bike accident on the way to work on the morning of the 14th September 1999 ended his walking career - "so 14/11 as a lot more significance to me than 9/11".

"It was slow and long recovery. - three major operations and several minor ones, and three and a half months in hospital, has left me with limited mobility in one leg - but I still have two legs to walk on. It has now been over seven years since the accident, but it has been only in the last couple of years that I have realized how lucky I have been. I can now walk unassisted and have no pain in the leg, but it could have been a lot different - the first operation took over six hours, during which the surgeons, managed to re-construct the lower leg and knee. - it was a touch and go at the time, as to whether the leg could be saved. Despite there being extensive nerve damage. I still have control of most of the leg muscles - I can wriggle my toes and move the foot, but there is little feeling in the lower leg - due to the damage to the sensory nerves."

Peter had been both an athlete and official for MUAC for many years (he recently received a 20 year award as an AV

official) so after he was finally out of hospital, he threw himself fully into a life as a full time athletics official. He had previously done some racewalk judging at interclub and had learned the finer points of judging from Jack Boucher. With Ray Smith's encouragement, he steadily increased his judging knowledge and took over the Chief Judge's position at VRWC when Ray retired from active judging. He now judges regularly at all levels up to national level and has recently earned his B grade judging accreditation.

"I have often been asked when I will compete again. Sadly I will not compete again - perhaps I will one day just walk a lap or two at the Walkers Club - just to say that I can do it. But nothing more. While I can race walk - I still do it as an exercise - the damage to the knee is such that it will not stand the amount of work that I would have to do to be able to compete effectively. To try and so so would result in a complete knee construction - something that I not want to do."



Peter in judging mode at Albert Park – at the 2005 VMA roadwalking championships

Peter has been a member of the Victorian Race Walking Club since the early 1970s when he first joined as a junior member. His history with the club includes many milestones which I shall briefly list here

- Over 30 years of continuous club membership.
- A regular member of Victorian and VRWC Federation teams from the 1970s onwards
- A member of the VRWC Committee since 2000.
- The VRWC Athletics Victoria Delegate since 2000.
- Our most regular VRWC judge (Peter is always there!) and the current VRWC Judging Coordinator. Peter judges at all Victorian championships, whether in Melbourne or in the country and can always be relied upon when needed.
- One of our main men for club maintenance jobs - whether putting in a new electrical switch, keeping the grass down near the back gate or putting up new shelves in the secretary's office.

The Victorian Race Walking Club is lucky to have so many people like Peter – former walkers who continue in the sport long after their glory days and who continue to contribute to our sport in so many ways.

Thanks Peter!