

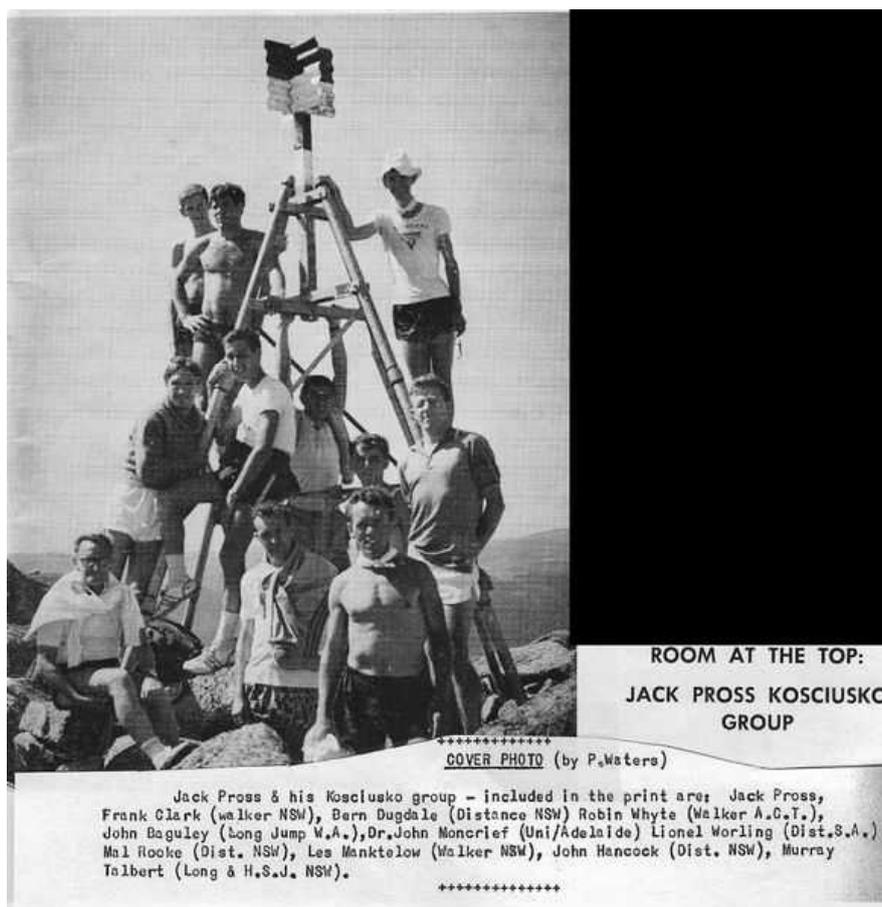
VALE ROBIN WHYTE: 1942 - 2022

I was saddened to hear of the passing of Australian racewalking legend Robin Whyte on Saturday 28th May 2022, after a long battle with cancer.

Robin, born 24th February 1942, was a well known and highly respected Australia's racewalker, competing first for NSW, and then for the ACT, in a career that spanned some 60 years.

He was one of many young and talented walkers to come out of Sydney in the early 1960s. The first racing reference I can find is his 7th place finish (in a time of 1:47:06) in the 1964 Olympic 20km Trial, held at Centennial Park in Sydney, in July of that year.

From that point on, he was a regular finisher in the various NSW, Australian and AFORWC championships on offer each year.



My oldest photo of Robin, dating from 1965 (photo from Frank Clark). Robin is top left.

In the mid 1960's, Robin moved to Canberra and immediately saw the need to develop racewalking in what was then a fledgling athletics environment. In October 1966 he, Peter Waddell, Nigel Crew and Tony Andrews, created a new specialist racewalking club, ACTAWC, and successfully applied for Federation membership.

From then on, although Robin still raced in the various NSW championships, his designation was always as an ACT walker.

By 1967, Robin's walking had improved to such an extent that he won his first medals - 2nd place in the 1967 Glover Shield 10km in Brisbane (49:52) and 3rd place in the NSW 50km Championship. 1967 also saw the inaugural Lake Burley Griffin 20 Mile walk, in which Robin came 4th (2:59:03), only losing his second place position in the final couple of miles.

A tall walker with a long raking stride, he found his niche in the longer distances. Over the next 8 years, he won either gold or silver in every NSW 50km championship and reduced his 50km PB to a very respectable 4:29:57.

1968 NSW 50km	1	Robin Whyte	5.01.56
1969 NSW 50km	1	Robin Whyte	4.43.00
1970 NSW 50km	2	Robin Whyte	4.44.08
1971 NSW 50km	2	Robin Whyte	4.28.55
1972 NSW 50km	2	Robin Whyte	4.53.14
1973 NSW 50km	1	Robin Whyte	4.34.57
1974 NSW 50km	1	Robin Whyte	
1975 NSW 50km	1	Robin Whyte	4.29.57



Robin, second from left, in a 1970 Australian Championship

The other event that he made his own was the annual LBG 20 Mile walk in Canberra. After his fourth place in 1967, he embarked on a streak that is unlikely to be matched on the Australian walking front. He started in every LBG 20 Miler from its inception in 1967 until his final start in 2018. Of the 52 starts, he failed to finish on only 5 occasions – a DNF in 1969 and DQs in 1982, 2005, 2016 and 2018. He medaled on two occasions: bronze in 1973 (2:46:13) and silver in 1975 (a PB 2:42:12) and he was a regular top 6 finisher for many years.



June 2016 marked the 50th anniversary of the first Lake Burley Griffin Carnival in Canberra. To mark the occasion, the camera captured three of the original 20Mile walkers: Robin, Harry Summers (VIC) and Bob Gardiner (VIC), along with Deanna Rahill (NSW) who had competed in the inaugural women's 2 Mile walk

By the early 1970s, he was amongst our best walkers. He took silver in the 1972 Glover Shield 10km in Brisbane (48:36), bronze in the 1973 Alexander Cup 20km in Sydney (1:39:12) and bronze in the 1975 Alexander Cup 20km in Melbourne (1:37:35).

1973 saw him win his first Australian Championship, the 50km in Brisbane. Walking on a very tough and hilly course that was anything up to a mile overdistance, his winning time of 4:52:18 did not really reflect the quality of his walk.

He contested the Commonwealth Games and Olympic racewalking trials when they came along, and he was usually in the top 4 or 5, but never quite high enough or fast enough to earn a berth in any Australian team. A typical example was the 20 Mile walk trial for the 1974 Commonwealth Games, held in Canberra in September 1973, The first 4 places read as follows

Commonwealth Games Trial, Canberra, Saturday 22 Sept 1973

1.	Peter Fullager	SA	2:37:09
2.	Ian Hodgkinson	WA	2:39:04
3.	Ross Haywood	VIC	2:43:00
4.	Robin Whyte	ACT	2:45:36

Peter Fullager, Ian Hodgkinson and Ross Haywood were all selected for the 1974 Commonwealth Games, but it was Robin who would have been next in line.

His next opportunity would be the 1976 Olympics and he started to string some good performances together. A 5 minute PB and 2nd place finish in the 1975 LBG 20 Miler (2:42:12), a gold medal and another 5 minute PB in the 1975 NSW 50km championship (4:29.57), a big PB in the 1976 Australian 3000m Track Walk Championship (13:10.2) and a silver in the 1976 Glover Shield 10km (a PB 47:59.8) indicated that he had stepped up to a new level.

He was second to Ross Haywood in the 1976 Olympic 20km Trial, held in Melbourne in April of that year, but his finishing time of 1:38:11 was not deemed to be fast enough and Ross was our only 1976 Olympic walk rep

There was one further chance of an international vest that year, as the IAAF was hosting its own replacement 50km world championship, in lieu of the Olympic 50km walk which had been removed. No trial would be held - selections would be at the selectors' discretion. Willi Sawall (4:12:20.6) and Tim Erickson (4:20:41.5) were well ahead of the opposition, while Robin had the next best 50km time (4:29:59.2), done in winning the NSW 50km Championship the previous year.

Finally, Robin's many years of hard work were rewarded and he was selected as part of a 3 man team, alongside Willi and me, to represent Australia at the IAAF 50km World Championship in Malmö, Sweden. There he finished a creditable 29th, his time of 4:30:08 only a few seconds outside his PB. For each of us, it was our first international vest and was a wonderful trip that left lasting memories.

Robin continued to race nationally after this, and he medaled in further NSW 50km championships (1st in 1977 and 2nd in 1978), as well as walking in the annual LBG 20 Miler, but his time at the top had come to an end, as younger and faster walkers appeared on the scene.



Robin (far left) competing in the 1978 Commonwealth Games 30km walk trial at Fishermans Bend in Melbourne

Although he remained a regular member of ACT walking teams at the various national championships, he now turned his attention to administration, taking on the role of chief organiser for the LBG Carnival. Under his leadership, the event grew into Australia's premier racewalking carnival, with total entries around the 300 mark throughout the nineties and early 2000's. He would don the ACTRWC vest and race the 20 miler, then oversee the administration of the carnival for the rest of the day, then rush into the evening presentations clutching the results sheets and ready to oversee that final important part of the weekend's activities.

He was awarded life membership of Racewalking Australia in 2001 and, at the time of his passing, was still serving the Federation in the role of Patron.

His introduction to the world of long distance walking was in 1978 when the annual Australian Centurions qualifying event was held in Gosford in NSW. On that occasion, Robin walked the first half with John Smith (who was successful and became C16) and was well on schedule for a successful finish until he withdrew for an hour's rest in the early hours of the Sunday morning - he had completed 110.96km in 13:39:44. He did not return to the track and thus missed his window of opportunity. It would be 18 years until he tried again, this time successfully.

His next attempt was in October 1996 when the George Knott Athletics Track in Clifton Hill, Melbourne, was chosen for the annual Australian Centurions qualifying event. Robin started at a brisk pace (2:45 per lap) which he maintained until the 50 mile mark, walked in continuous rain. At 90km he took his only break for the entire race - a 5 minute rest to change into dry clothes. Then he was off again, maintaining a pace of between 3:00 and 3:30 for the remainder of the race. He was determined not to stop, remembering what had happened the previous time in Gosford. There was never any real likelihood of him retiring and it was a very pleased walker who crossed the line just after 10:30 AM on the Sunday morning. His feet were a mess, with bloodied shoes, and he had to be helped from the track - but this was a small price to pay and only a temporary inconvenience when compared with the great achievement of walking 100 miles inside 24 hours. With his walk, he became Australian Centurion number 29 in a time of **20:37:12**. Just over 3 hours later, Merv Lockyer also finished to become Australian Centurion number 30.



Robin completes 100 miles in Melbourne in 1996 in pouring rain

Three years later, in September 1999, he fronted for the annual Australian Centurions qualifying walk, this time at the Coburg Athletics Track in Melbourne. This was our best ever Centurion finish with 7 qualifiers, 5 of them new. Robin was the fourth of the group to finish with a time of **21:34:48**.



*1999 - Robin is one of 7 centurion finishers
Back: Herbert Neubacher, Gerrit de Jong, Gerald Manderson
Front: Jill Green, Robin, Carol Baird and Sandra Brown*

Four months later, in January 2000, he was back in action in the annual Coastal Classic 12 Hour Event in Gosford. Showing wonderful form, he won with a new event record of **98.12 km**. This time stood for many years as the Gosford Coastal Classic record and lasted for 11 years as the M55 Australian 12 Hour Record until finally bettered.

In September 2000, he snared his third Australian Centurion finish at the annual qualifying event at Coburg. Aged 58, he strolled through the 100 miles in a time of **22:29:32**.

From then on, he restricted his endeavours to 12 Hour and 6 Hour walks. The Coastal Classic was obviously his favourite event as he competed in it every January until 2007, nearly always finishing in the first 3 and consistently walking around or above 90 km.

He made a welcome return in the 2005 Australian Centurion 24 Hour event at Coburg, taking second place in the inaugural Australian 100km championship with a time of **13:57:09**.

A couple of years later, in August 2007, he entered the 12 Hour event at the Australian 48 Hour Championships carnival on the Gold Coast, Queensland. Not really expecting anything special given his current level of training, he surprised even himself with his performance, passing the 50 Mile mark in 10:53:50 and covering a final 12 Hour distance of 88.301 km to set two new M65 Australian records. His long stride was perfect for the long distances and he covered the miles quickly and seemingly without undue effort.

Robin's appearances in the long distance events were now less frequent as his other activities take precedence, but he did make the occasional foray onto the track, usually to set some new age group record or another. His last major long distance walk was in the 2017 Australian Centurions qualifier in Melbourne, when he set three M75 records: 6 Hours (49.406km), 50 Miles (10:55:16) and 12 Hours (85.997km). They will take some beating!

He loved to compete, and he was in attendance at every ACTRWC club race. My stats indicate he toed the start line in 40 races in 2017, in 37 races in 2018 and in 33 races in 2019.



*Left: August 2007 - Robin sets new M65 records in Queensland
Right: April 2017 – Robin sets new M75 records at Coburg*

Sadly, this was to come to an end in 2019, when Robin was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. A long and complex operation was followed by many months of chemotherapy. But Robin was never one to shirk from a challenge and he faced the uncertain prognosis with quiet strength and grace.

He finally lost his battle in the early hours of Saturday 28th May 2022, aged 80 years.

We have lost one of our most well known and highly respected walkers and walk administrators. His quiet demeanour and personal charm endeared him to us all and we will all miss him, especially come the annual LBG Carnival.

Rest easy, old mate.

Tim Erickson
Sunday 29th May 2022