A PERSONAL BEST

The History of the
West Australian Marathon Club

WA MC

DINO GAVA
1997

In the late nineteenth century Australia was a world leader in professional running. It was a great attraction for competitors and spectators alike. The professional circuit covered Australia from Stawell in Victoria to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. Arthur Postle and Jack Donaldson became legends, holding almost half the world's sprint records between them. In 1906 Postle won the world's sprint championship in Kalgoorlie from Ireland's R. B. Day in front of a crowd of more than 15,000[6].

Legendary status was also attained by Aboriginals Charlie Samuels (the greatest runner of the 1870s) and Bobby Kinnear (Stawell Gift winner 1883)[7]. Few Aboriginals have aspired to amateur competition, until the advent of Cathy Freeman. The Stawell Gift was first run in 1878, becoming the world's oldest and Australia's most prestigious professional footrace.

Bill Junner, father of West Australian Marathon Club (WAMC) life member number 4, Colin, won the two mile event at Stawell in 1907 and was placed in the mile. An uncle, Don Junner, won the half mile and mile at Stawell, as well as winning many other professional races from 440 yards to a mile. Another uncle, Colin Junner, is credited with a remarkable performance. He won an 880 yards handicap at the WACA ground and then travelled in a hansom cab to Fremantle where he won another half mile event on the same day[8]. Sharp practices and deception gradually reduced the popularity of professional athletics in Australia.

Amateur Athletics

Amateur athletics in Australia date back to 1887 when Associations were formed in New South Wales and New Zealand. Other Associations were established in Victoria, 1891; Queensland, 1895; Tasmania, 1902; South Australia, 1905; and Western Australia, 1905[9]. The Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) of Australia and New Zealand was formed in 1897 (New Zealand withdrew in 1927), and meetings were held biennially. From its inception amateur athletics laid stress on manliness, health and morality. Its success owes much to the liberation of the Saturday afternoon from work. Australia's connection with international athletics came in 1912 with the formation of the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF), which placed international athletics on a firm footing.

A prime mover in the formation of the AAU was the father of amateur athletics in Australia Richard Coombes of NSW. His longevity as a sporting administrator, his unyielding attitude to amateurism, and his advocacy of the Empire Games concept set trends amongst officials that had repercussions all the way to the formation of the WAMC.

The first attempt to form the West Australian Amateur Athletics Association (WAAAA) occurred in 1905 but it was disbanded in 1907. It was reformed by six clubs and incorporated in the AAU in 1928[10]. Prior to its reconstitution, amateur athletics in West Australia played an exceedingly small part in sporting activities. The sport was confined mostly to long distance and cross country running.

The 1909 Marathon

The first marathon run in Western Australia was in 1909, largely the effect of two significant developments which had enhanced the profile of distance running in Australia and the state.

The first was the revival of the modern Olympic Games at Athens in 1896. Among the 18 runners representing five nations in the marathon was the Australian Edwin Flack, a product of the Melburnian Hare and Hounds cross country team. He led the field till a couple of kilometres from the finish when he was overtaken by the eventual winner, Spiridon Louis of Greece (2:58:50 for the 40 km course). Flack had earlier won the 800 and 1,500 metres, but there was not to be a nineteenth century Zatopek.

The Games established the popularity of the marathon as an amateur event, leading to a host of runs particularly in France and the United States (Boston began in 1897). In Australia the tremendous efforts of Flack, dubbed the Lion of Athens, resulted in much coverage in the press stimulating interest in the Olympic movement and long distance running. Further interest was aroused by Stanley Rowley with his success in the 5,000 metres cross country as part of the British team in Paris, 1900.

The second factor concerned the drama of the London Games marathon of 1908, a watershed in the marathon's popularity. Media coverage of Dorando Pietri's collapse and assistance close to the finish, his disqualification, and the granting of the race to American John Hayes had a global effect in stimulating marathon running, especially throughout the Commonwealth (The London 'Poly" began in 1909). The professional marathon duels between Pietri and Hayes in the USA after the Olympics provided further impetus, sparking world wide marathon interest.

Australia's first marathon was organised by the YMCA in Sydney in August 1909 but was not given AAU official status. It was won by Andrew Sime in a time of 3:05:30.2. Andrew Wood (second in Sydney) won the Australian championships in Brisbane four weeks later in 2:59:15.4 from a field of 26. In 1985 another Wood, Grenville, won the same event in a much faster 2:13:37, but in an equally convincing fashion. Sime (third in Brisbane) won in Melbourne in October, and again in Sydney in 1910. A year later Stuart Poulter (third in 1910) took the NSW title to qualify for the 1912 Stockholm Olympics.

The *Melbourne Herald*[11] reported a large cheering crowd for Sime's win on Saturday, 9 October 1909, the same day as Perth's first marathon, but few spectators got the running bug and marathon running went into the doldrums. For years the Australian marathon title was held almost as an afterthought, often in conjunction with track and field championships.

In Perth, lively discussions as to whether the Italian (Pietri) would have been able to finish unaided, or whether he should have been disqualified on a technicality led to the professional Coastal Athletic League organising the "greatest test of endurance in the athletic world"[12] for the first time in Western Australia. The event was one of importance to Western Australia, attended by high dignitaries and thousands of spectators. Newspaper coverage was second only to horse racing, relegating coverage of the 1909 Australasian Tennis Championships being held on the same afternoon, one of the first occasions that WA has been designated the location of a national sporting event, to third spot. Such interest was not to be matched until the People's Marathons of the mid 1980s.

In West Australian athletics it was an epic. The race started and finished in front of the Ozone Hotel, one of Perth's fashionable favourite sporting rendezvous, and turned around at the Fremantle Town Hall. The Governor, Sir Gerald Strickland, started the event. When the gun failed he showed true imperial improvisation by dropping his hat from the balcony as the signal to start. The ground below was a thick layer of mud, but His Excellency's headgear did not get that far as his coachman caught the hat in flight. Fourteen of the fifty one starters battled heavy wind and rain to finish within the four hour time limit. An incentive for the runners was that cinematograph pictures were to be taken at various stages of the race.

Betting on the marathon assumed unusually large proportions. W. "Bill" Junner (Colin Junner's father), well known member of the WA Tattersall's Club and prominent runner, was favourite. Cramp forced his withdrawal after 20 miles at Cottesloe. Another strong fancy was W. Garrard, a recent arrival from Victoria. Like Junner, he was a previous winner at Stawell and holder of the Australian mile title. His trainers were so suspicious of WA conditions that they brought their own water in earthenware jars from Victoria. The winner was C. "Chris" Hilderbrandt by seventy yards from J. "Jim" Weaver in 3:00:0.6. There was talk of the time being an Australian record, but many locals were unaware of Andrew Wood's time in Brisbane. Hilderbrandt had to call in at the *West Australian*[13] to scotch rumours that he had died early Sunday morning.
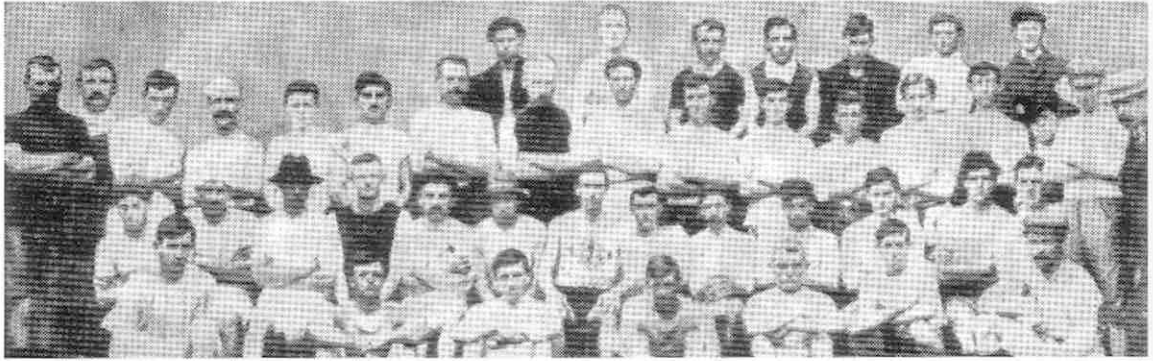
Figure 1. *The First WA Marathoners, 9 October, 1909.*

L-R. Back row: 2, J.C. "Pat" Healy; 4, E.Howell. Third row: 1, W. Hackford; 3, W. Junner; 4, F. Webb, 6, J. Fermanis. Second row: 3, A. Capes; 7, E. Lewis; 8, A. Lewis; 10, J. Weaver (second place); 13, S. Smith. Front row: 1, J. Crowley; 2, G. Barrett-Lennard; 4, T. Barrett-Lennard; 5 W. M. McGregor; 6, C. Hilderbrandt (Winner).

The photograph was taken at the rear of the Ozone Hotel shortly before the start.

Western Mail, 16 October 1909.

Hilderbrandt was the dark horse of the event and he and his connections cleaned up several hundred pounds more than his twenty pound first prize as a result of the win. His performance was remarkable in that he had never run a race before and had done only three weeks training. This was in keeping with the milieu of the time, running to get into the act rather than for physical fitness. It came out later that in training he had run from Perth to Pinjarra in 7½ hours, and had gone over the marathon course twice before, the second time in 2:38, just two minutes outside the existing world record. It was this knowledge that gave his connections confidence to bet on him[14]. His other prizes were a gold medal and silver cup. He donated the cup to the WAAAA in 1957 to be awarded to the winner of the State marathon title each year.

Another interesting competitor was J.C. "Pat" Healy, who was later to become a well known bookmaker, but was then playing league football for East Perth and some six stone lighter than in his bookmaking days. His training consisted of the occasional run from Perth to Fremantle and back before breakfast. He crossed the line in equal twelfth position supporting Cooper who was exhausted. Few received a better reception than Perth's most prolific long distance pedestrian, Hackford (eleventh), and a meritorious award was received by McGregor, the oldest competitor in the race. It is interesting to note that the Junner family took fifty years to win the coveted marathon title. In 1959 Bill Junner's son and fellow WAMC member, Colin, won the race conducted under amateur conditions.

Figure 2. *Reunion of distance runners, June, 1957.*

L-R. Bill Junner, Jim Weaver, Chris Hilderbrandt and Pat Healy looking at the photograph of the 1909 runners (figure 1).

West Australian, 18 June 1957.

Two marathons were held in Perth shortly afterwards, one finishing at Claremont and the other at Fremantle, but they failed to capture the excitement of the first one. They suffered from the same malaise that reduced the popularity of all professional running - allegations of doping and wilful interference with certain runners.

Cross Country and Track

The first world war brought to a close athletic activities in Western Australia and after the cessation of hostilities the YMCA conducted numerous paper chases and cross country running during the winter months[15]. The paper chases continued till 1948 when expansion of the metropolitan area to favoured trails around Inglewood and Bassendean contributed to their demise.

Early Australian long distance runners preferred cross country to road running. Andrew Wood won the first Australian Cross Country Championships over ten miles in 1910 in 60:15. In 1910 and 1921 the championship distance was ten miles and in 1912 and 1923 it was five miles. From 1925 the distance was standardised at 10,000 metres (6 miles 376 yards) until the introduction of the 12,000 metres international distance. The race is open to teams of six representing the individual states. The first four to finish are given points according to the positions in which they finish. The team scoring the fewest points is declared the winner[16]. Meetings were held biennially to 1975, then annually. Cross country has had a much more continuous history than the marathon, which remained a race for eccentrics for many years.

It was not until 1928 that a determined effort was made to foster track and field athletics in Western Australia, and even then it was on a modest scale. The first State Track Championships

Figure 6. *Women's Track and Field Championships of Australia, Leederville Oval, 1940.*

Two Victorian runners and a Queenslander led Western Australians Margaret Orr, Joan Faulkner and Betty Judge in the first lap of the 880 yards. Betty Judge came from behind to narrowly defeat Margaret Orr.

West Australian, 12 March 1940.

In the immediate post war period Australian female athletes were successful internationally. The evolution in women's running began with Shirley Strickland's silver and two bronze at the 1948 Olympics and culminated in the 1950s when the feats of Australia's women athletes passed into sporting folklore. For the first time the press and the public became fully aware of women's sporting capabilities. But the inequalities they experienced persisted.

1   *The World Book Encyclopedia*. Volume 13, 1971, P. 150.
2   Quercetani, R.L. (1964). *A World History of Track and Field Athletics 1864 - 1964*. London: Oxford University Press, P. 162.
3   Professor Geoffrey Bolton, Edith Cowan University, *Interview*, 23 May 1995.
4   Quercetani, P. 133.
5   Blainey, G. "The rise of the sporting hero" in *Quadrant*, January - February 1995, P. 9.
6   Blainey, P. 11.
7   Daly, J.A. "Track and field" in Vamplew, W. and Stoddart, B. (eds.), (1994), *Sport in Australia. A Social History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, P. 263.
8   Colin Junner's scrapbook, undated newspaper cutting, *Sunday Times*, 1953.
9   *Souvenir Programme*, Sixth Biennial Track and Field Championships of Australia, Leederville Oval, Perth, WA, 25-27 January 1947, P. 2.
10 Fred Napier, O.A., Life Member of AAWA and Athletics Australia, Athletics West archivist, *Interview*, 16 January 1996.
11 *Australian Runner*, 1984 Annual, P. 88.
12 *The Western Mail*, 16 October 1909, P. 26.
13 *The West Australian*, 11 October 1909, P. 5.
14 Colin Junner's scrapbook, undated newspaper cuttings, *Sunday Times*, August 1973 and *Western Mail*, 1948.
15 F.T. (Theo) Treacy, *West Australian Amateur Athletic Association. A Brief History*. Undated, in possession of Fred Napier.