History of the St George District Athletic Club
Compiled by Michael Gentle

Claude Smeal

1952 Olympian

Claude Smeal joined the club late in the 1949 distance running season and immediately made his mark by winning the club marathon championship.

Throughout his time with the club, Claude served with the Australian Army:
- Involvement, World War 2 (1939, Major)
- Involvement, Korean War (1951, Captain)
- Discharged (1973)

He competed in the 1952 Olympic Games marathon in Helsinki, Finland whilst on leave from the front line of the Korean War. The story of his training, selection & participation is extremely unique.

1952 Olympic Games Marathon

Following his victory in the 1951 NSW Marathon Championship, Claude Smeal began to dream about the Olympic Games that would be held in 1952. His posting to the frontlines of the Korean War in October 1951 provided another challenge.

He trained daily on dirt tracks and rice paddys surrounding his army base, wearing his distinctive red & white striped club singlet and makeshift shoes. The countryside was littered with unexploded land mines, and there was a constant threat of enemy snipers shooting at him yet he persisted with his training.

Due to his war posting, Smeal had not competed in the Australian Olympic marathon trial. He was thus not considered for selection when the Australian Olympic team was named in March 1952. His training continued and in April 1952 two war correspondents heard of the Australian soldier who ran when not actively engaged in fighting. Noel Monks (London Daily Mail) and Norman Mcswann (AAP-Reuters) travelled from Seoul to visit him.

The story was published in the Sydney newspapers in late April 1952. Smeal had applied to the NSW Athletic Association for inclusion in the team at his own expense pending his ability to prove his fitness at the British Marathon Championship to be conducted in London in June 1952.

Games Hope For Smeal

N.S.W. marathon runner Claude Smeal, now serving in Korea as an Army lieutenant, may represent Australia at the Olympic Games in Helsinki.

Smeal has applied to the N.S.W. Athletic Association for inclusion in the team at his own expense.

He said he would be in England in June and would run in the British marathon championship to prove his fitness.

The association has asked the Athletic Union of Australia to have Smeal entered for the Games if he runs well enough in London.

Australian standard for Olympic qualification for the marathon is a time of 2 hrs. 38 mins.

The Sydney Morning Herald
28 April 1952 p.5

MARATHON RUNNER TRAINS IN KOREA

LIEUT. CLAUDE SMEAL is training in Korea for the Olympic Games marathon race.

Smeal, NSW marathon champion, has applied to be added to the Australian Olympic team.

Officials believe Smeal will be added to our team if he can reach the standard time of two hours 38 minutes for the 26 miles 385yd.

Smeal expects to be transferred to England and will contest a big English race in order to qualify.

In a letter to Sydney friends Smeal says he is training hard in Korea, although training facilities are poor.

Lt. Claude Smeal

The Sun
27 April 1952 p.9

The war correspondents were impressed and offered to act as time keepers for a marathon trial to be conducted over a very roughly measured course just behind the front line. Smeal completed the trial on 19 June 1952 in adverse conditions some six minutes outside the Olympic qualifying time, and forty-four minutes slower than the world record of the time. Noel Monks, who was an Australian, dispatched a cable to his former boss Frank Packer and asked him to use his influence to have Smeal added to the Olympic team that had already left Australia and was en route to the Olympic Games.

Trial in Korea

TOKIO, Thurs.: Capt. Claude Smeal, of Sydney. signals officer with the 3rd Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment, today completed his trial here for the marathon event at Helsinki Olympic Games next month.

Smeal ran 26 miles in 2 hr. 45 min. 8 sec.

The result of the trial was cabled to the Australian Olympic Committee.

Smeal, who is prepared to pay his own expenses to Helsinki, has been promised leave.—AAP Reuters

News (Adelaide)
20 June 1952 p.19

Smeal On Way Soon

MELBOURNE, Wednesday.—Captain Claude Smeal will leave Korea soon for Helsinki to compete with the Australian Olympic Games team.

The Australian Army will provide his transport each way and adequate expenses.

Announcing this to-night the secretary of the Australian Olympic Federation, Mr. Edgar Tanner, said that Smeal's nomination would reach Helsinki well before the deadline on July 5.

Captain Smeal, under bad conditions, recently ran the Marathon distance (26 miles 385 yards) just outside Seoul in a little more than two hours 40 minutes.

The Director-General of Recruiting, Lieut.-General Sir Horace Robertson, had recommended his nomination for the Australian Games team.

Mr. Tanner will leave for America on Saturday on his way to the Games.

Smeal has been registering good times in Korea, but his performances do not quite reach the standard set by the Australian Athletic Union.

Secretary of the Australian Olympic Federation, Mr. Edgar Tanner, on Saturday will leave for America on his way to the Games.

Smeal's entry form must be signed by Mr. Tanner and Mr. Hodsdon and airmailed to be in Helsinki not later than July 5, the closing date of entries for the Games.

Chairman of the Olympic Federation, Mr. Harry Alderson, said that if the Athletic Union nominated Smeal it would receive the endorsement of the federation.

The Sydney Morning Herald
26 June 1952 p.8

Frank Packer wielded his influence and Claude Smeal was added to the Australian Olympic Team within two days, with the Australian Army providing leave and transport support for the venture.

The 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games marathon race will forever be remembered for the amazing performance of Emil Zatopec who won the race in 2:23:03, having already won gold medals in both the 5000m and 10000m events. The reigning world record holder, James Peters from Great Britain, and a number of other competitors were not able to finish the race. Smeal finished in 45th position with a time of 2:52:23.

Following the Olympic Games, the Australian Army did not post Claude Smeal back to Korea as he had expected. Instead he was dispatched to a non-combat signals unit in Hiroshima, Japan. The media reported this with unfavourable mention of Smeal who appeared to have used the Olympic Games to leave the front line. Smeal fought the Army for his right to return to the combat posting, and continued to run while in Japan.

1952 Hiroshima Marathon Relay

On 19 November 1952 Claude Smeal coached the Britcom Signals Regiment team competing in the marathon relay race between Hiroshoma and Kure in Japan.

Corporal C.E.Fry taking over from Lieutenant C.V. Smeal.

Competitors from Signals who won in record time a marathon relay race between Hiroshima and Kure.

In June 1953 Smeal won his dispute with the Australian Army and was posted back to his unit which by then had been transferred to Brisbane, Queensland where the soldiers were training for further overseas postings.

1953 Queensland Marathon Championship

Claude Smeal won the Queensland Marathon Championship race held on 25 July 1953 in convincing fashion, smashing 39 minutes 20 seconds off the previous record time in a race with only four starters.

Since he was not a Queenslander he was not awarded the championship, that honour going to Eddie Barnacle who was the only other finisher some 61½ minutes slower.

WON IN RECORD TIME BUT WON'T HOLD TITLE

Olympic runner Claude Smeal (N.S.W.) slashed 39min. 20sec. off the Queensland record in the Queensland marathon championship over 26 miles 385 yards yesterday.

The time Smeal recorded to beat in the only Queenslander to finish, Eddie Barnacle, was 2 hours 53 minutes 30 seconds.

Eddie will be awarded the championship because Smeal is not a Queenslander.

A veteran of nearly 30 years running. Barnacle yesterday, clocked 3 hours 55 minutes 5 seconds to take his first marathon championship.

The only other two starters, Graham Jobst and Frank Honer, pulled out at 19 and 22 miles respectively.

Intending to give himself a light workout at the start of the race, Smeal found that he was running better than he anticipated. He then decided to give himself a stiffer test for the New South Wales marathon championships in a fortnight's time.

Far Left:
Sunday Mail (Brisbane) p.28
Sunday 26 July 1953

Left:
Truth (Brisbane) p.16
Sunday 26 July 1953

Club Championships

	1st	2nd	3rd
1949:	Marathon	15 Miles Road	
1950:	5 Miles Road 10000m C.C. 10 Miles Track 15 Miles Road Marathon		
1951:	5 Miles Road Marathon	10 Miles Track	
1953:	Marathon		
1955:	Marathon	15 Miles Road	
1956:	15 Miles Road	5 Miles Road	10 Miles C.C.

Notable Results

Date	Event	Location	Place	Time
6 Aug 1949	NSW Marathon Championship	Rockdale, NSW	6th	3:12:11
3 Sep 1949	NSW 15 Miles Road Championship	Manly, NSW	12th	
23 Sep 1950	NSW Marathon Championship	Rockdale, NSW	5th	3:06:37
11 Nov 1950	Victorian Marathon Championship	Melbourne, VIC	5th	2:57:23
3 Feb 1951	NSW Marathon Test	Windsor, NSW	1st	2:50:45
5 Mar 1951	Australian Championship Marathon	Hobart, TAS	4th	
15 Sep 1951	NSW Marathon Championship	Windsor, NSW	2nd	2:48:06
19 Jun 1952	Marathon Time Trial	Seoul, Korea		2:44:08
27 Jul 1952	Olympic Games	Helsinki, Finland	45th	2:52:23
25 Jul 1953	Queensland Championship Marathon	Brisbane, QLD	1st	2:53:30
15 Aug 1953	NSW Marathon Championship	Botany, NSW		
4 Jun 1960	Australian Championship Marathon	Melbourne, VIC	16th	3:00:11

Further Reading

The club website has many documents pertaining to the history of the club available for download in pdf format: http://www.sgdac.org/documents.php

The club website has detailed results of club events, open handicap events, track & field events, and State, National and International Championship events featuring club athletes from 1921 onwards: http://www.sgdac.org/results.php

Summary of Claude Smeal's results: http://www.sgdac.org/Athlete/2056/1/

Please contact the author via webmaster@sgdac.org with feedback, suggestions, additional information, results or resources to help expand and improve these history documents.