

FOREVER YOUNG: The Cliff Young story



IN Australia in 1983, fame was still relatively democratic. That year, one of the most popular TV shows in the country starred a craggy former painter turned comedian.

In the same 12 months a locally made movie called *BMX Bandits* made a star of a gangly young girl with frizzy ginger curls, freckles and crooked teeth. The Paul Hogan and Nicole Kidman of that time are hardly recognisable as the celebrities they are in the 21st century.

But at that moment, there was far less of a cookie-cutter predictability to Australian fame. Even the opening of a significant landmark in May 1983, the launch of the Sydney Entertainment Centre, played to that.

The event featured another unlikely Australian star: the camp, balding maraca-shaker Peter Allen.

And so on the second evening of the Westfield Ultra, when Channel Ten news ran a story on the race, particularly its scrawny, aesthetically challenged oldest participant, Cliff Young, oddballs might just have been flavour of the month.

The reporter who compiled the Ten report was Cliff's new mate Neil Kearney. "We filmed him having a feed," recalled Kearney. "He was having a can of pears and he was just spooning them straight out of the tin as he went along. And he said to me, 'I've gotta have these pears, Neil, they're full of carbohydrates!'"

Cliff's unintentional mispronunciation, made all the folksier by the fact that Cliff was toothless – he never wore his false teeth when he ran because they clattered about in his head – was the centrepiece of Kearney's report.

The following day, a Friday and the third day of the race, Cliff featured in newspaper reports all over Australia.

Over many a broadsheet and tabloid column centimetre, enthusiasm and amazement at Cliffy's feat-in-progress bubbled up: a "possible legend in the making" was emerging.

He was Cliff, the simple 61-year-old “cattleman” who continued to lead a comparatively youthful and experienced (and better looking) field in the world’s longest road race. He was still only a “possible” legend – no one in the media or in the general populace really thought he could pull it off over the long haul – but on that Friday, Cliffy was the story du jour.

The Australian public might still have taken some convincing, but now someone outside the Cliffy camp was beginning to believe. Cliff had repeated his routine of 24 hours earlier.

He’d gone to bed later than the others, got up earlier than them and run further than anyone. That had race director John Toleman beginning to entertain the thought that Cliff might win.

It helped that Cliff was beginning to believe it, too. He had got so far in front on so little sleep, and with Wally (Cliff’s mate and running partner) constantly geeing him up with the idea that an hour here and there was all that was required, he now thought, ‘Who needs sleep? I’ll just keep going’.

After all, he could snooze as much as he liked when the race was over. Unlike (competitor) George Perdon and his sleep banking and self-restrictions, there was no science to Cliff’s approach, nor any thought of self-preservation –and therefore, no limits.

Cliff, friend Mike Tonkin explained, was a man very much in the now (in the days before being in the now was hijacked by new age spirituality). “He had a simple approach. He just took what came to him, nothing more, nothing less, and made the most of it.”

And this was quite a moment to make the most of.

“He wasn’t going to run any more than 75mile a day,” said Toleman. “Cliff had no limit. With these things you’ve got to have a want to win. You’ve got to have determination and unbelievable stamina. And there’s another thing a coach can’t give you: it’s courage. And Cliff had all those things.

“But more important, he wanted to win. And when he got to the front he ran like a scared rabbit. He didn’t want to stop. Everyone was going, ‘Oh, this old bloke’s just gotta blow up.’ He was just miles and miles and miles in front – he covered over 200 mile in the first 48 hours. And he didn’t want to stop.”

In the next 24 hours he would slow down. It was more difficult terrain. Not that it particularly worried Cliffy.

The country between Jugiong and Gundagai is scenic, with rolling green pasture and groves of magnificent gums and plantations of poplars and other pretty European trees lining long driveways, providing windbreaks or simply nestling along the mighty Murrumbidgee River. You can get plenty of good views of all that loveliness. Cliff likely wasn’t soaking up the vistas, but his feet ate the stretch of road up.

Meanwhile, the others had slowed down too, and some more than Cliffy had.

Perdon and world thousand-mile record holder Siggy Bauer were pacing each other through the hills. But Perdon expressed his dislike of the hilly terrain, telling reporters he was conserving his energy for the later stages of the race.

“I’ll give ’em a taste of running on the flat,” he said, hoping knowledge of his success across the dead flat Nullarbor would get into the heads of competitors – Cliff’s in particular, given he was apparently the hills specialist.

Perhaps Perdon hadn’t figured on the wind-beneath-Cliffy’s-wings factor: the tide of public support.

Jugiong was a small, picturesque hamlet with willows hanging into the river, ducks to be fed and not much else going on. But on this Friday, excitement gripped the local primary school. The children were allowed a special outing to watch the leader of the Westfield Sydney to Melbourne Ultra-marathon pass through.

Local CB radio got wind of the approximate time the runner was to arrive and the children were called to assembly in the quadrangle.

Regimented into pairs, holding hands, they obediently wound the short walk to the main street, Jugiong's little section of the Hume Highway. There they were marshalled into a line along the road where they waited, giggling and jostling in anticipation.

Then they saw him. He shuffled along, one shoulder drooping with the arm hanging limp.

There were holes in his pants and a gauntness to his appearance. But his body was angled slightly forward in determination and when he saw the children smiling and waving at him, his toothless mouth broke into a grin.

He lifted his good arm so his elbow was level with his shoulder, his forearm pointing skywards in a jaunty wave. The children waved back, clapped, waved back and clapped again.

And unlike previous towns, where people had sporadically come to cheer the race itself rather than anyone in particular, these kids were cheering the runner personally.

“Hooray, Cliff!” “Go, Cliff!” “Cliffy, Cliffy!” It was his name. It was applause for him. Cliff was purely and simply delighted. And immeasurably buoyed.

The exchange of adulation. This was the moment that first defined Cliff's appeal. He was original but loveably familiar, a combination of listening to Dad 'n' Dave on the wireless and watching an underdog team win the Grand Final.

And then he was humble, someone who shared his success with those who admired it. In that moment, he loved those kids as much as they loved him. When it comes to star-making, there are few talents more powerful than making other people feel included.

As Cliff shuffled out of Jugiong, he was still leading all nine other runners – and how. Joe Record was the closest to him, but he'd fallen away considerably to be 35kilometres behind. From Cliffy in front to the runners at the very back, the field stretched over a hundred kilometres.

That was a headache for John Toleman. “As race director, what I'd started doing was driving from the front to the back, checking our runners. And in the end, because of Cliff, that was taking me about a four-hour turnaround in my little Toyota van. I was back and forth, back and forth. And there were a few drivers at the front and one at the back. We didn't have relief drivers. They drove slow and relentlessly. After a few days they got so bloody tired. They drove as far as they could and then they stopped and had a sleep and then they drove again.”

Gundagai did not turn out to greet Cliffy, but it was the 500-kilometre mark and Cliffy celebrated it with a 15-minute stop for a rub-down from trainer Wally, some tinned spaghetti and a toilet break. It would be his last relaxed, incognito stop. And from here on the interest Cliff was about to generate would provide the perfect safeguard against cheating: the eyes of the world turned to the race.

Did the world think he would win? (Westfield marketing executive) Martin Noonan felt the initial attention was more about whether he would survive. ‘The focus was not on Cliff winning the event – it was ‘Will this old man live?’“ he said. Especially as the elements turned against them.

Much of south-eastern Australia had been in drought, almost continuously, for four years. The beginning of 1983 was like a culmination of it, with heatwaves, fires, dust storms and the driest months on record for Victoria and Tasmania. Heavy rains began in March, and the big wet went into April, giving the wheat belt one of its best crops in years.

Great for wheat; not so great for runners. As day three progressed, it got wetter and wetter. Someone tried to give Cliff a wet-weather jacket. But his shoulder was in so much pain from an earlier fall that he couldn't lift his arm to put it on. The rain was icy and the wind chill made it worse.

John Toleman caught up with Cliff on the road and suggested he have a painkilling injection in his shoulder. "He told me where I could stick my needle in no uncertain terms," Toleman recalled, "then he just plodded on." Without his support vehicle. (Cliff's support crew) Wally and Wobbles had stopped in Gundagai for a counter lunch. On their way to catch up with Cliff, just outside the town of Tumblong, they found the race's youngest competitor, John Connellan, struggling. Wally leant out of the car. "Hey, what's up with you, mate?" he called out.

"Aaw, Wally, damn, mate, my ankles are swollen, my back hurts, my legs ache ..." Unlike the race's oldest competitor, Connellan's reply was a litany of complaint.

"Listen, mate, you ain't tired till your eyes bleed! Now, get on with it!" Wally replied, spreading the tough love around. It did no good. At Tumblong, Connellan slumped into a chair on the pub balcony with a beer in hand and told reporters, "I've got a few apologies to make to these old jokers ... Why doesn't somebody shoot that little bloke out in front? ... I just cannot believe that a 61-year-old is making mincemeat of us all."

Meanwhile the little bloke, Australia's latest sports hero, steamed on. Still the clear leader as the runners approached the border at Albury, despite having all sorts of issues.

Clothing, for one thing. Cliff only had the garments on his back. He needed new underwear, of all kinds. "At one stage, he done his 'nana,'" recalled Wally.

"He wanted another pair of socks. I grabbed a pair of socks out of his bag and they were bloody socks that got taken off him beforehand. And of course he puts one on, and all of a sudden he goes flyin', takes it off and bloody chucked it on to the table, on to the ground, 'I had to be on the road with donkeys like you!'"

I couldn't find him a pair of socks. But I found him a bloody pair of my socks that I'd exchanged. I give him them. "Ooh, that'll do," says Cliff.

More importantly, he needed another pair of shoes because his were falling off him. His support crew scoured towns for appropriate runners, to no avail until, finally, John Toleman organised some for him to be sent up from Melbourne.

Even more dire than the state of Cliff's shoes was what was going on inside them. "Cliff had a blister on his foot. You should have seen the size of it," said Toleman. "Wally was a bloody lunatic. Wally said, 'Well, I'll fix that.' He pulled out a rabbit knife, sharpened it on a strap and he cut the bloody blister out. And then he put Cliff's foot into a dish of methylated spirits and just held his foot there.

"Even now I can still feel the pain. He put a tape around it. That was just out of Albury and he had a long way to go."

Cliff was well on his way to the border. He told a reporter: "I said I'd show those bludgers a thing or two before we got to Melbourne and I am ... They all reckon I am getting tired and they are not wrong. But don't tell me they're not getting weary too. I'm determined not to let anybody go past me. I'll drop to the road if I have to."

Cliff led Joe Record by nearly 24kilometres near the border. Gentleman Joe was meantime being hailed for his “tremendous performance”, especially as he had been passing blood. He ran bare-chested through the thumping downpours and, like his mate Cliffy, he looked oblivious to pain.

This is an extract from Cliffy: The Cliff Young Story by Julietta Jameson and published by Text.