

The Coburg 24 Hour Carnival and Centurion Walk

“My, How It’s Grown”

Report by Kevin Cassidy

I have no idea who pulled off the master stroke of securing Kirstie Marshall as the guest celebrity but make no mistake, we were honoured with her presence to undertake the official firing of the starters gun. A current day state politician, Kirstie is best known for her illustrious career as one of the world’s premier exponents of aerial skiing. I was awestruck as she elaborated on my inquisitiveness about her life on the slopes. The 1997 World Championship and victory in the 1992 World Cup came across as the most dominant achievements of her impressive career. In the company of sporting royalty, I made a shabby attempt at enhancing my own stature by expanding on my “Andy Warhol” 15 minutes of fame when I managed to snare the green third place ribbon by the narrowest of margins from the freckle faced Johnny Smith in a diving photo finish at my primary school egg and spoon race back in 1967.

As one of the few current day permanent residents of King Island, Geoff Molloy is most likely unaware of what he inadvertently created back in 1984. With the euphoria of Cliff Young’s stunning Sydney to Melbourne performance the previous year still riding the publicity wave, Geoff was keen to have a crack at the race himself and was desperately looking for a trial run before finalising his decision. A number of phone calls by Dot Browne brought together a handful of runners and an unofficial 24 hour race took place at the Box Hill Athletic Track in February 1984. Geoff promptly set a new Australian record and went on to taste victory in the second Sydney to Melbourne run [*or Melbourne to Sydney as it was on that one occasion*]. The following year saw a flood of entries to what had become the Victorian 24 Hour Championship and official Sydney to Melbourne qualifying event.

With steeply rising hiring costs at Box Hill proving hard to absorb, the rapidly growing race moved to Coburg in 1988 where numbers continued to boom as ultramarathons across the country experienced a surge in popularity and participation. A downturn in numbers almost saw the death of this event with only eight runners in 1993. Dot Browne promptly announced her retirement as Race Director.

With no ultra experience amongst them, The Coburg Harriers, lead by the abundant enthusiasm of Gordon Burrowes, took it upon themselves to keep the event alive. The inclusion of relay teams proved to be the saviour with this one single change carrying the events viability for three years or so. Further changes included the introduction of 6 and 12 hour options and in 2001, the joining of forces with the annual Centurion Walk which had been operating independently at various venues for many years under the thorough stewardship of Tim Erickson.

The irony of the steady resurgence is that the “event saving” relay has basically become obsolete.

In 2006, the Coburg 24 Hour Carnival, as it is now known, played host to 52 individual competitors.

“I used to do a sport that was all over in three seconds” enthused Kirstie Marshall, seeming both impressed and bewildered, as she sent the runners and walkers on their way. The concept of 24 hours of perpetual forward motion is probably imperceptible to

most and is no ordinary undertaking by any stretch of the imagination. Competitors consisted of an eclectic mix of sizes, shapes and ages but all with the common characteristic of steady patient determination. The large number of veteran age athletes was a statement in itself with Stan Miskin and Ken Matchett both on the wrong side of 80!

Notable in the field was the number 19 bib worn by Peter Gray signifying his presence in all 19 events since the move to Coburg. "I'll get my twentieth next year" he exclaimed to confirm an already obvious fact. Peter is Australia's most prolific ultra runner with 189 races under his belt to date.

Always of interest are the nonchalant but cheery dispositions of certain runners. These very same individuals seem to handle the graveyard night time hours better than others. Stretching out around the track during the early stages, it was like a time warp from the eighties as the likes of Bob Fickel, John Timms, Dawn Parris, Stan Miskin and Bill Beauchamp quietly reeled off the laps. Honestly, these guys have been in the ultra game for longer than it took the Chinese to build their Great Wall! Bill surprised us all by running in something other than his tatty old Collingwood football jumper. Undoubtedly, a surgical operation was involved in its removal as I could not envisage it being willingly discarded.

The sight of a travelling circus coming to town is arguably the most accurate description of the venue as the various support crews set up tents and tables of supplies for the long day and night ahead. Watching the competitors settle into their planned eat-drink-run routines was entertaining in itself with the forms of sustenance coming in a vast kaleidoscope of unusual looking concoctions. An odd mix of pureed banana and beetroot seemed to do the trick for one cheery individual as he plundered his copious supplies. I could only assume that it tasted half reasonable but don't ask me to describe the colour. Meanwhile, one crew member was catering for his runner's requirements with an array of peanut butter and vegemite sandwiches that neatly awaited consumption. Mounds of provisions dominated the veritable tent city that enveloped the northern end of the track.

Max Carson, another long time veteran, was again gracing the track in fluorescent pink shorts. They appeared to be brand new which made a delightful change to the thin faded pair that we have become so accustomed to. Stan Miskin laid claim to resembling a Kenyan with his dark brown tights but in all honesty, it looked strikingly as if he had failed in a mad dash to the toilet!

By mid afternoon, the entire venue was a hive of activity and the efficient and professional computer lap scoring system was ticking over with a minimum of fuss. It really was a credit to the large number of Coburg members who work so hard to stage one of the ultra world's annual features. Malcolm Matthews and Mark Kelly were the computer geeks at the helm. In fact, Mark has set up shop. Cyber Services is located at 10 Gilbert Road, West Preston *[Just a couple of doors south of Russell's Sports]* so pay Mark a visit for all your computer needs and an earful of excellent and informed advice. In fact, make that two ears full. Mark sure knows computers back to front and inside out.

Lamenting the fact that circumstances decreed that I had to leave before nightfall and miss all bar the last two hours, I was heading for my car when Bob Fickel informed me of a distinct and urgent lack of paper in the trackside "port-a-loo". In the blink of an eye, I had loaded my arms with no less than 22 rolls of paper and began a beeline for the paperless ablutions facility in a scene that would have rivalled Manuel's performance in the "Mrs Richards" episode of Fawlty Towers.

Barely seven hours had elapsed as I drove out of the venue to the sight of competitors working diligently towards their personal goals. Foolishly, I answered the annoying shrill ring of the mobile phone,

"Hello, I'm Robert from AGM Glass and I would like to talk to you today about windows".

Hanging up immediately without answer, the phone rang again.

"F... off Robert" I answered abruptly.

A brief silence followed before a faint female voice cut in.

"Is that you, Kevin?"

Imagine my embarrassment as I tried pathetically to explain away my rudeness to an elderly friend who was innocently enquiring about the chances of having me mow her lawn during the week! Worse still was the sudden attack of guilt that overcame me over my atrocious manners towards Robert. The poor guy, whoever he was, must have been seriously struggling to make ends meet to be phone canvassing on a weekend. Perhaps he was working towards birthday presents for his young children, or more desperately, new school uniforms. I felt decidedly like the proverbial first class heel.

Disappointed at having to miss the night hours, the very stage in which a 24 hour race evolves, I returned the next morning with a little under two hours remaining. The contrast to the previous day could not have been more profound with tired bodies dragging themselves onwards in a form of survival trudge. The steady, even routines and pacing of the previous day had vanished and the good natured banter amongst competitors had developed into a form of companionable silence. Entering the last 20 minutes, finishing positions were unlikely to change but a sudden new found sense of urgency permeated the atmosphere as competitors miraculously found fresh legs in one final surge to the finish.

A regular on the ultra scene in the eighties, I happened upon Peter Pfister munching thoughtfully on a sandwich and taking in the final minutes of the race from the sidelines. Peter is still in regular contact with Ramon Zabalo, the mighty French multi day champion from that era.

Although a little less attractive than Kirstie Marshall, Race Director Bernie Goggin fired the final gun, an action that had tired bodies slumping and collapsing on the track in a variety of emotions. Utter elation for those whose goals had been realised while disappointment was the order of the day for others who fell short of their expectations.

Having walked the entire 24 hours, David Billett celebrated his finish by taking off for a 100 metre run!

"Back to the Trails" was Richard McCormick's simple solution to having fallen short of his target.

"I'm Hooked" squealed Lee Earle in delight with her 12 hour performance while Gary Turner couldn't contain his deep satisfaction at having doubled his previous distance with a remarkably steady showing in the 12 hour walk.

Fast becoming a modern day Cliff Young, 58 year old Garry Wise stormed home to win. Quite extraordinarily, Garry only took up running 18 months ago but is rapidly making a name for himself at ultras all over the country. The ever positive Robert Boyce grabbed the second placed trophy with a display of guts and dogged determination that tested the extremities of his will power. So exhausted was he that he couldn't attend the presentation! – not surprising in the circumstances. Third male was Rodney Ladyman.

Arriving just two days prior from our northern state of sunburn, long white socks, slow moving drivers and “one nation” voters, Rodney stoically braved the onslaught of the unseasonably chilly weather that even had locals bemoaning the early appearance of winter.

Finishing third overall, the female trophy went to Michelle Thompson, another relative newcomer with just two years experience. Her tally of 100 miles plus was indicative of her focus and intelligent execution of her race plan. Keep an eye on our respective winners over the next few years as they are most certainly on the upward curve.

The Centurion Walk produced four performances of 100 miles with Patrick Fisher knocking over the prestigious mark for the first time. His expression of gratification won't fade in any sort of rush.

The developments over 24 hours are never easy to predict. Meeting for the first time a year ago at this event, Karyn Bollen and Terry O'Neill had taken the term “friendship” to previously unexplored heights of the stratosphere. The chemistry they created on the track was quite evident at the presentation as they happily sat hand in hand. Imagine the story they can spin when asked in the future how they met. “Well you see, we were out on a long walk and.....”

As the sole male entrant in the 12 hour run, Ernie Hartley was always assured of a win. Missing the presentation as he rushed off to work, I had the “privilege” of delivering his hard won prize to the nearby service station where he dutifully performs the role of manager. Striding past two youngsters refuelling their car and listening to the music of one of those modern day wrap artists whose major contribution to the world of music is that irritating “doof, doof, doof” sound, I approached the counter and handed him his large trophy. Ernie appeared somewhat sheepish but his staff and several customers were mightily impressed with his “stunning victory”