

2. Jack Webber (20/10/1914 - 26/01/1998)

20/21 August 1971

22:44:53

Adelaide Harriers Track, Adelaide, SA

Written by Tim Erickson in February 1998

It is with great sadness that I report to members on the death of our oldest Centurion member, Jack Webber. Jack, as we all know, was suffering from cancer and was given only several weeks to live some months ago. Jack, however, amazed all the doctors by outlasting their prognoses and continuing to lead an active life. But his condition was such that this could not go on forever and last week he had deteriorated to such a stage that he was hospitalized and gradually passed away. He was put onto morphine during the last days and was not in pain. His wife Ruth was with him most of the time and Jack was an example to us all of how to accept death gracefully and courageously.

It is fitting that Jack passed away in the early hours of January 26th 1998, Australia Day, as there was no finer example of what the real Australian spirit is all about. At the funeral on Wed 28th January, we were ably represented by Tim Thompson and Geoff Peters and a club donation has been made to the Anti-cancer Foundation as a memorial to Jack. Geoff tells me that it was a very big funeral with both young and old in attendance. He was one of a number of people who said a few words about Jack.

Jack had all the attributes that we expect of our Australian heroes. He was a consummate sportsman and a dedicated family man, he ran his own small business and he helped many people over many years, passing on his love of sport and his determination to achieve his best.

We will all miss Jack. His zest for life was great, his love for people was sincere, his interest in all things athletic never dimmed. To his wife Ruth and to all his family, we pass on our sincerest sympathies.



Jack (far right) competing in the 1961 South Australian 10,000m racewalk championships

I would like to take this opportunity to remember Jack's life with the following biography.

Jack was born on 20 October 1914 and showed athletic talent early. He was a schoolboy champion in sprints and middle distance and was soon spotted by the talent scouts of the time. In 1931, Clem Duncan, the then coach of Adelaide Harriers, persuaded him to join the club, a move that subsequently saw the 17 year old win the Junior State Titles over 440 yards and Cross Country in his first year.

Thus started a long career in athletics. Jack improved as a runner and for nearly a decade during the forties, he reigned supreme, winning endless state and club titles in events from 880 yards to Cross Country, including a memorable victory against World Cross Country Champion Jack Kenyon, in the 1941 Camden 10 km Classic.

Alas recurring calf injuries curtailed his running career in 1949. It was then that he met former Australian walk champion George Wilson who suggested he try racewalking, primarily for therapy but also as an alternative discipline, to retain his fitness.

Mastering the technique quickly, he was hooked. And to his delight, the calf problem also disappeared. He has walked consistently since then in a walking career of over 40 years. Over this time, he has amassed an impressive list of achievements which include winning the 1951 Gawler to Adelaide marathon walk in record time and a clean sweep of the AS Walkers Club Championships in 1952 from 5 miles to 50 km. He represented the State on various occasions during the fifties.

In 1971, at the ripe old age of 57, Jack became the second centurion walker (C 2) in Australia, covering the 100 miles in a time of **22:44:53** at the Adelaide Harriers Track.

In 1979, Jack set himself an even tougher task - to walk from Melbourne to Adelaide. He set off from Melbourne on Wednesday 15th August 1979 and reached Adelaide on Saturday August 25th to set a new walk record of an epic 10 days 2 hours 30 mins. He regarded this as perhaps his greatest achievement and he had the privilege of being accompanied by former Olympian Marjorie Jackson over the last few hundred metres - amid a great reception - to the Adelaide Town Hall. Geoff Peters, soon to become a Centurion himself, took two weeks of work to accompany Jack, providing massages each night and attending to all his needs throughout the day.

In 1980, another example of Jack's extraordinary capacity for endurance events saw him create a world record in an unforgettable performance around the Adelaide Harriers track, covering a staggering 1062.25 miles (4269 laps) in 38 days 2 hrs 30 mins, an average of more than 27 miles per day - at the age of 66! He started at 9AM each day, walking a marathon a day for 38 days to complete his 1000 mile target. Then he continued on for a further 62.25 miles to finish his endurance event just as Geoff Peters started his successful Centurion attempt on Saturday 6th September.

Jack was also involved in the Veteran movement and his successes in World Veterans Games included 2 silver medals in Christchurch in 1981 (5000m and 20km) and a bronze in Melbourne in 1987 (20 km). On both these occasions, he was also a member of the winning Australian team and won team gold.

Jack kept competing into the M80 Masters division. We also saw him walking many laps with the competitors in the 1994 Centurion walk in Melbourne.



Jack and Ruth Webber stride out for the cameras in 1997

With over 60 years in the sport and as the elder statesman of the SA athletic scene, 83 year old Jack had seen all the changes, for better and worse. He saw the gradual development of athletics over the years as the catalyst for the now fast growing trend in the general community of the need for health and fitness, regardless of one's age. He saw the enormous benefits derived from the feeling of well being as the secret to a quality of life, especially in advancing years.

Jack kept a busy walking schedule even during the last few years of his life when he was in his eighties. He competed each Tuesday night at the Adelaide Harriers track in short distance walking races. He still competed in the Veterans SA State champs and in his pet events like the various Masters Games and in the Pitchi-Richi Half Marathon. He had recently started a group of Veteran Walkers in Adelaide and it is going well with an enthusiastic group of older people who have drawn from Jack's boundless enthusiasm.

Jack was never one to rest quietly and recently heard about the annual Four Day Noajin Walk in Holland. In this mass participation event, some 33000 walkers walk up to 50 km per day for the 4 days. Jack wrote away for information and was obviously keen to savour the experience. Alas, time ran out for him after being diagnosed late in 1997 with pancreatic cancer. The prognosis was that Jack had only weeks to live. Jack accepted this news with his usual calm manner and determined to live his remaining time in the same way that he had been doing up till then, continuing on with his normal routine and enjoying whatever time he had left. He gradually deteriorated but lived for a further 3 months or more before succumbing to the inevitable.

We will remember Jack as a fine walker, a fine Centurion and a great Australian.