

6. *Tim Thompson (16/03/1946 - 01/05/2007)*

21/22 October 1972

23:48:08

Edwards Lake Athletics Track, Reservoir, Victoria

Tim Thompson was born in Adelaide on 16 March 1946, one of a family of 9 children. He grew up in Adelaide, married there, raised his family there and always called it home. He was indeed a South Australian in all ways and a passionate one at that.

He took up racewalking while in his teens and threw himself wholeheartedly into his new found athletic endeavour. When the Australian Centurions were formed in 1971, SA based founder Len Matthews had his ideal candidate firmly targeted – Jack Webber. Jack had been for many years the South Australian walking champion over many distances and had attempted some longer walks. At 57 years of age, Jack was ready to take on a much greater challenge.

The first race date for the modern era was set – August 20-21 1971, with the venue being the Adelaide Harriers Track, a cinders track set in parkland just south of the main Adelaide city area. The rest is history – Jack completed the walk in 22:44:53 without any major difficulties and became the first Australian Centurion under the new governing body. The only other starter was Tim who reached a distance of 47.75 miles before retiring.

Tim was determined to add his name to the ranks of the newly founded Centurions and his opportunity came the next year in Melbourne. Stewart Cooper summed it up nicely as follows

There are two specific memories that remain with me, and that I treasure. The first is of a night (perhaps it was early morning) in November 1972, exactly a year after I had qualified for membership of the newly-formed Australian Centurions. This exclusive club has but a single entry requirement – to join, you must walk 100 miles in less than 24 hours. The year I did it, I was one of three such lunatics to succeed, the others being Jimmy Gleeson and Clarrie Jack. Jim was the particular hero of the event, going beyond 100 miles to set an Australian 24-hour record that stands to this day. A year later Jim was back at the Preston track to try again. I was at a party that night and missed much of the early action, but got to the track a little after midnight to lend my support to Jim.

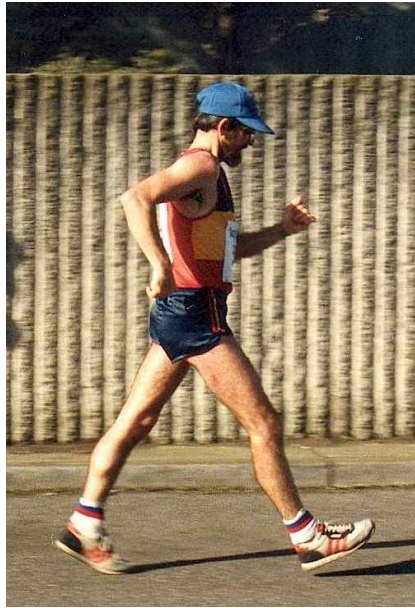
As the night wore on into morning it became clear that Jim was struggling a bit and would be little likely to improve on his record. He did, however, look in better shape than the other guy on the track – someone I hadn't seen before. He moved at an agonised shamble and was clearly in need of all the support he could get. Clarrie was there beside him and I joined them, exchanging idle banter and offering tips from my own experience from the previous year. The wannabe Centurion, though suffering and slowing progressively, was alert enough to express both appreciation and admiration: 'I wish I could get one of those badges like you got, Stewie', to which I replied something like 'You will, mate – and you'll do it now.' And that was the beginning of my friendship with Tim Thompson of South Australia – one that lasted for nearly 35 years.

Tim passed the 100 mile peg that day with a meagre 11 minutes and 52 second to spare, sobbing as he collapsed: 'I never thought I'd make it!' before being bundled into an ambulance with his feet in a state that probably left the ambos wishing they'd gone into merchant banking instead. The Centurions' honour board bears fifty-three names now, yet I have no hesitation in saying that no place on that board was harder-earned than Tim's, nor more dearly prized. Tim achieved more than Centurion membership that day – he earned the admiration and respect of the strong Victorian race walking community for what all knew was a display of sheer guts and determination, of resolute mind over blistered, tortured matter.

The second memory is from five years later. I'd already met Beverly, of course, but it wasn't until 1977 that I got to know her. That year the National Racewalking Championships were held in Adelaide, and it was the scene of one of Tim's proudest achievements – a fourth place in the 50km title race behind two internationals, both Victorians. I wasn't one of them, sadly – I finished a distant eighth in that race – but I will always remember Tim hiring a minibus the next day and taking the Victorian squad on a tour of the Adelaide Hills with his young family – in particular, with four-year old Tania perched on my lap (no

compulsory seat belts in buses then). It was a magical day, one that cemented our friendship. It also demonstrated Tim's boundless hospitality and generosity, and again reinforced the high regard in which he was held east of Bordertown..

Tim's racewalking continued to improve throughout the 1970's and amongst his best performances were the above mentioned 4th place in the 1975 Australian 50 km championship in Adelaide and a win in the 1976 City of Mordialloc Cup 50 mile event in Melbourne (with a very impressive time of 8:48:06). He eventually reduced his 20 km time down to a fraction over 100 minutes and always felt that breaking 'the hundred' was one of his few unfulfilled ambitions in walking. He was a prodigious racer, contesting every South Australian championship and frequently travelling interstate to contest the Australian and Federation championships. He was just as prodigious in his training feats, regularly clocking in excess of 100 miles and occasionally well in excess of that figure.



Tim in action in an Australian 50 km championship at Fishermans Bend in Melbourne in the 1980s

In 1976 Tim and Bev purchased a property in Longwood in the Adelaide Hills and they laboured hard over the next two years building their family home, only to see it totally destroyed in the 1980 Ash Wednesday bush fires. It was a devastating loss but they took comfort in the fact that their children had been kept safe while attending schools elsewhere in the hills. Tim worked extra shifts at work in an effort to earn more wages and a new house was rebuilt on the property a few years later.

In December 1994, Tim suffered a stroke, which led to the discovery of a brain tumour in early 1995. After a successful operation, his recovery was slow – but he was determined to return to his beloved walking and to his voluntary duties with the St. John Ambulance as soon as possible. He continued to work with the Commonwealth Bank until retirement in 1997 after 33 years of service.

Tim loved travelling and he had been overseas in 1991 and walked in four different countries. He often spoke of his walk in Ireland, his first walk in Finland and especially of his walk in the Nijmegen Four Day event in Holland. In 2000 Tim and Bev bought a property on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland and from then on, their life rotated between Adelaide and Queensland and the 4wd and caravan were in almost continuous use. Tim would plan his trips to coincide with the various Masters Championships and he was a regular competitor in these walking championships.

Tim's health started on a downhill slide in his final couple of years. At first the illness was just thought to be a virus but eventually tests showed a virulent brain tumour. With support from his wife Bev and his family, he bravely battled against the debilitating effects but it was the final battle that he could not win. In the early hours of Tuesday 1 May 2007, he finally passed on, with his family present. He was only 61 years old.

Knowing how sick he was, we were surprised to see him and Bev turn up as spectators and supporters at the Coburg 24 Hour Carnival only 2 weeks before. It was Tim's last big effort and gave us all a chance for one final meeting. It was obvious then that Tim was weakening quickly but it was still a shock to get the final phone call from Stu Cooper. I had spoken to Bev only days before and Tim was scheduled for an operation in early May to try to relieve the effects of the tumour.

Tim will live forever in our club memory as Centurion Number 6. We will cherish our memories of Tim, his amazing memory for all things athletic and his warm and welcoming personal style.

The final word is from Stuart Cooper

Walking was, of course, never far from our conversations, and Tim's recall of past races – especially, but not only, the ones he did well in – was beyond phenomenal. Never one to be content only with memories, long after the motor accident and major surgery had consigned his best walking years to the past, he was still at it, venturing to all parts of Australia to take part in Masters' events, even when he could no longer train. Tim walked because he loved it, because he could do it and was grateful that he could. Lacking the fast-twitch muscle fibre that is often mistaken for talent, he made up for this with a near-unfathomable capacity for hard work. Few walkers impressed as much with their sheer endeavour, nor were so appreciative of what they were able to achieve, however it stacked up against that of their peers. Tim Thompson was a model ambassador of race walking, of his state, of the fraternity of sportsmen. With only days left to him, it was still so precious for him to be able to visit us once more at Coburg for the 24-hour walk.

There is a lesson there. When things start to seem pointless, when another hamstring goes bung, when the urge to complain and give up starts to take hold, the vision of that green and gold tracksuit with its glistening Centurion No 6 badge and the wicked, knowing grin of its wearer will continue to inspire this Victorian for years to come.



Tim (second from right) in Brisbane in 1997 with Tim Erickson (C 13), Chris Clegg (C 11), John Harris (C 12) and Stan Miskin (C 23)