

VALE NORM MORRISS (30/01/1941 - 23/04/1999)

32. *Norm Morris (30/01/1941 - 23/04/1999)*

22:32:47

19-20 September 1998

George Knott Athletic Field, Clifton Hill, Vic

VALE NORM MORRISS (30/01/1941 - 23/04/1999)

I was shocked to receive a phone call from Dudley Harris in April 1999, advising that Norm Morriss (C31) had died suddenly while out training in his home town of New Plymouth in New Zealand. Norm stayed with our family when he came over in September 1998 for our Centurion qualification walk and so I can say that I knew him perhaps a little. He was a warm and friendly person who seemed to take everything in his stride. We thought that his performance in our event was so outstanding that we awarded him the Jack Webber trophy. Imagine completing a 100 miler only 5 months after a quadruple heart bypass operation.

Merv Lockyer showed me a letter he had received from Norm only the week before he died. In the letter, Norm was cheerfully expounding his latest endeavours and sounded confident and ready for anything. It just goes to show the uncertainty of our lives. All we can do is live life to the full, being players rather than spectators. Norm was an example to us in how to respond to adversity. In a situation that might have floored others, he was prepared to challenge the situation and meet life head on.

Dudley Harris delivered the eulogy at the funeral, held in New Plymouth on 27 April 1999. Gerald Manderson made the long trip from Palmerston North to bid farewell to a fellow Centurion. The church was packed out, the congregation including members of Taranaki Race Walking Club (which Norm had founded), his widow Megan, his mother Beatrice, and his many friends.

We only saw Norm walk twice in Australia.

In November 1996, he walk the Colac 6 Day Championship. On the first day, when so many runners went off with a hiss and a roar, Norm was content to clock 126km for 15th place. During days 2-4, Norm's plus-or-minus 100 km per day soon pushed him up through the field to 10th, then 9th out of 18 starters. On Day 5, things began well, with Norm squeezing into 8th place. By the day's end, Norm was still 10th but he was effectively out of the race. Day 6 saw him complete just one lap, after which "*disaster struck my leg. No amount of therapy helped - very frustrating to feel so good mentally and physically - except for my bloody leg !*" Despite rest, ice, heat, ultrasound, strapping and a lot of swearing, Norm completed no further laps. But Norm's accumulated **495.2 km** was enough for 13th place and his performance had set a new standard for Australian walkers. Others would follow in his footsteps at Colac.



Norm in action (left) and finishing his 100 mile walk (right) at Clifton Hill in September 1998

In September 1998, he returned with 3 other New Zealanders to attack our Centurion qualifying event at Clifton Hill. And attack it he did, consistently tracking behind Gerald Manderson who was leading. Like Gerald, he had

few breaks and just kept putting the laps in. The contrast between the 2 was stark. Gerald was short in stature, stocky with a quick business like gait. Norm was tall and lean with a long raking gait. It just goes to show that fitness, rather than build, is the main criteria to a good 100 mile walk. Norm finished a clear second in the fine 100 mile time of **22:32:47** and then stopped. He had achieved his goal of Centurion membership.

Less than 6 months later, he was dead.

I enclose a copy of Dudley Harris's obituary as a final remembrance of Norm.

Norm Morriss was born in Darfield, Canterbury, and attended Christchurch High School for Boys. In the early 1980s, he moved to New Plymouth. Eventually made job-redundant, he spent 3 years as a IHC community services worker.

Tall in stature, big in courage, quiet in manner, the diminutive of his name came naturally, because there was nothing bombastic or pompous about Norm.

For anyone who has not met him, if you've ever seen the American actor Gary Cooper in films such as 'High Noon', you'll have an image of Norm ... laconic, reliable, a man of honour. But Norm was no actor - he didn't say much, preferring to quietly do things that often left the rest of us amazed and inspired.

As a race walker, Norm worked his way up to marathons. Not being a runner, he would take his proper place at the back of the field, swap a few pleasantries, and then with a big grin, engage another gear and quietly take off in pursuit of the 'tail-end charlies'. The game was to see how many runners he could wind in.

Then he found a new challenge; ultras, starting with 50 km events. But the Taranaki Race Walking Club had bigger and better ideas - in 1992, they revived the Hawera-to-New Plymouth 50 mile event, which Norm then won in 9:34:58.

After that, he moved up to 24 hour events. In 1996, he decided to racewalk the Colac Six Day championship. After a few days, they began to take this guy with the swivel hips seriously, as he moved up to 8th place in a field of 18. Then, at the start of the final day, he had to pull out. The severe night temperatures were probably what caused a quad-muscle to tear from the tendon. So Norm finished 13th in the final listing.

"What now?" I asked him. A long pause .. then "What I'd really like to do is the 1000 mile Nanango track race in 1998."

But it was not to be. In April 1998, Norm had a problem. Despite a gentle period playing lawn-bowls, he was flown to Hamilton for a quadruple heart bypass operation. Two days later, I met him. Norm was now a member of the 'zipper club', and kept to get a few laps of the ward under his feet, on the comeback trail.

With his cardiologist's blessing, Norm eased himself back into training, for he now had a new goal. Those 24 hour events had been OK, but without racewalk judges, they didn't really count for a man with Norm's temperament. But over in Melbourne, there was an annual event for race walkers who wanted the classic challenge of completing 100 miles within 24 hours. To do so would earn Norm the title of Centurion.

Indeed, Norman Morriss became Australian Centurion No 32, with his 100 miles completed in 22 hours, 32 minutes and 1 second. Not only did Norm win 'silver', he was also awarded the Jack Webber Trophy for the most meritorious performance of the event - it was five months to the day since Norm had had his quadruple heart bypass operation.

The last time I saw Norm was on Sunday 29th November 1998, when he drove over to Taupo to join some others of us in forming the New Zealand Centurions Endurance Walking Club. As always, he was smiling.

An infectious smile - one couldn't help but feel it was a very good day to be with him. I'm sure that he is still smiling.

Dudley Harris