

AUSTRALIAN CENTURION DETAILS

53. **Pat Fisher (17/03/1948)**

23:10:38

22-23 April 2006

Coburg Harriers Track, Coburg, Vic

The 2006 Australian Centurion qualifier, which was held on the weekend of 22-23 April at the Harold Stevens Reserve in Coburg, saw a total of 25 walkers and 27 runners entered. The race started at 10AM on the Saturday morning in typical Melbourne autumnal weather – variable and impossible to predict! The forecast threatened showers but luckily the race was spared and conditions, although slightly on the cold side, turned out to be nearly ideal for such an event.

The 24 Hour Walk events saw 4 walkers – Jens Borello (C52), Pat Fisher (C53), Deryck Skinner (C54) and Geoff Hain (C55) - reach the 100 mile mark and thus achieve the Centurion standard.

Patrick Fisher (C 53) came into the event with only one ultra distance walk to his credit, a noteworthy 87.880 km in the 2006 Gosford 12 Hour.



Pat (on right) with Peter Bennett and Andrew Ludwig after his third place in the 2006 Gosford 12 Hour walk

Prepared by and supported during his centurion attempt by Canberra based centurions Robyn White and Carol Baird, he always looked strong and was still full of walking as he reached the 100 mile mark in **23:14:03** to become Australian Centurion number 53. He then continued on to reach a 24 Hour distance of 165.605 km. He also finished third in the associated Australian 100 km championship with a time of 13:54:19.



Pat Fisher (C 53) on the way towards his successful centurion walk

Pat put his own thoughts down on paper. It's a great read.

THE ROAD TO BECOMING CENTURION 53

I never intended to be an ultra walker. My background was in running with some racewalking in my younger years. I went to seed in the early '80's and in 1993 found that my suit from a few years earlier was 4 inches short of meeting in the middle. I then made a comeback to running and shed 17Kg. By now I was 45 and the running eventually took its toll on my joints. I got sick of running in pain so started to walk. I found when I walked my joints weren't as sore and if I did longer walks and threw in some hills I could get some of the training effects I got from running.

My last run was the Canberra Marathon in 1996, this finally finished me off and I couldn't do anything for months after it. I then started to walk for fitness and weight control and started walking with the ACT Race and Fitness Walking Club in 2003. I was pleased that they had expanded from being just Race Walking as I could not get the style right and would be scrubbed out of any race. I had a good year in 2004 walking the ACT Veterans half marathon in 2 hr 14 and the ACTRFC 50 Km on a freezing day in September in 5 hr 53min, and winning the Vets handicap walking pointscore for the year. I was particularly pleased with the 50Km and was thrilled that I could cover this distance and in particular that I was able to go on at a consistent pace and didn't hit the wall.

Carol Baird (C39) was encouraging me to attempt a Centurion Walk in 2003 and even gave me the entry form for the Coburg 2004 event! I told her I thought you would have to be crazy to walk for 24 hours. Carol was also suggesting I try the Gosford 12 hour which is held every January, but I thought you'd have to be crazy to walk all night as well! I stood firm on this resolve but in September 2005 I started to have a few walks with a group training for the Gosford 12 hour walk in January 2006. I had no intention of going to Gosford and saw the outings as a social event and used them to try and get myself motivated after having gone through a rough patch in mid 2005 and having some leg problems.

There are pivotal moments in anyone's life and, on Saturday 1 October 2005 one of mine occurred a few kilometres into a 2-hour walk around Lake Ginninderra when Val Chesterton asked whether I'd like to go to Gosford for the 12-hour walk in January 2006. For some reason unknown to me I said I would! I think the fact that a large group was going was attractive; I didn't really think through at that time how hard it would be to walk for 12 hours around a track.

The rest, as they say, is history. I was on a slippery slope towards attempting what I vowed I would never do, the 24 hour ultra. I went to Gosford, thoroughly enjoyed the camaraderie and, thanks to quite a lot of long walks both with the group (including 8 hours with Val one day) and by myself, managed to get used to longer walks and get fit enough to walk the 12 hours without stopping and finished quite strong at the end. The only problem was my feet were so painful I could barely walk after the event. I managed to cover 87.8 Km in the 12 hours and finished 2nd to a great walker called Peter Bennett from Queensland who bashed out 98Km, amazing! Peter was a Centurion and I knew this was something special.

A couple of weeks after Gosford and when my feet had peeled, I was feeling quite good and I recall a thought coming into my mind going up a hill near home "If I can walk the 12 hour with relative ease, I might be able to do the Centurion walk!" On returning home after this walk I announced to the family "I'm going to be the next Australian Centurion!" This comment was greeted with looks of disbelief and my wife reminded me that I had said I would NEVER do Gosford and I would NEVER do a 24 hour walk. I had no reply to this, I could see that I could live to regret this decision but at the time I felt I could do it.

With the decision made I counted out the days between D-day and the Coburg event and set out to do as much training as I possibly could handle in the intervening days. There wasn't a large group preparing for Coburg but Sharon Chomyn who had competed in the Gosford event was keen to give the 12 hours at Coburg a go so we started doing weekend training walks. These walks started in the dark and we mostly did laps of the lake with the occasional venture into tougher terrain. The walks were at a good pace and were generally about 5 hours in duration.

At the same time I was doing regular walks of four to seven hours' duration by myself. Early on I was training in Stromlo Forest, which had been treeless since the 2003 bushfires. I had many memories of running and walking through the forest years ago when there were trees there. I made sure I picked out as many hills as I could and I just tried to maintain a steady pace. Carol advised me to walk on harder surfaces to prepare for the Coburg track so six weeks out from the event I threw in a lot of footpath and bike path walks.

I had read an article by Tim Erickson about preparing for the 100-mile walk and he advocated a long all day stroll to get used to being on your feet for long periods. So on Wednesday 8 March (45 days out from the event) I set off from home at 6am and circumnavigated most of the southern part of Canberra returning home to the bemused looks of my family 14 hours later just after dark. I was really tired and all I could think of was 'at Coburg I would still have 10 hours to go!!' My family were a bit concerned when I hadn't returned by dark and my son apparently said to his mother 'I think dad's gone a bit weird'. The 14-hour walk put my feet back to how they were after Gosford so I knew I had to pay more attention to taping my feet. I made some tactical errors like complaining two days after my 14 hr walk that my feet were sore and actually expecting any sympathy at home! I can remember sitting on the lounge with my feet up with the balls of both feet throbbing wondering why I had decided to try for the Centurion

walk! My feet improved considerably after I soaked them in neat metho each night for about a week.

In all I covered about 1,500 Km in February and March and started to taper and carbo load about a week before the Coburg event. If I counted my preparation for Gosford and Coburg I had been doing long stuff for seven months so I hoped this was enough. As the event drew closer I began to lose the confidence I had when I made my decision in January to try for the Centurion.

Robin Whyte (C29) drove me to Melbourne with his caravan attached. The closer we got to Melbourne the day before the race the colder and more menacing the weather looked. The night before the race was freezing and raining.

We set up camp on the edge of the track at Coburg on the night before; a tent city slowly grew in the hours before dark. As we had no power, we had no heating and I slept with several layers on top, a beanie, gloves and woollen socks. I tossed and turned all night wondering why I ever thought I could do it. I felt like someone about to face the gallows in the morning. It finally dawned and the day was here! Hard to believe it had all come to this. There was a guy called Louis who must have been tough, he was sleeping in his truck next to us having driven 1200 Km to walk 24 hrs and he was in shorts and a T-shirt! I remember we had a discussion on whether the 24-hour ultra was 10 per cent physical and 90 per cent mental; someone said perhaps it was 70 per cent mental and 30 per cent physical. What we all failed to see was that we were all 100 per cent mental to be trying it.

Prior to the race I prepared a schedule and my aim was to complete 17 laps per hour, which, IF I could maintain it, would give me 408 laps after 24 hours, over the magic 402.3 laps required to do the 100 miles. I was careful at the start not to go off too fast. I was going a bit faster than schedule for the first few hours but felt good. I saw Louis fresh from his sleep in the truck lap me many times in the first few hours, looking good. He would later pay dearly for this, as would several other walkers who went out far too fast. After 6 hrs I was 9 laps ahead of schedule, 111 laps down only 291 and a bit to go!! After 12 hrs I had covered 86 Km (almost as much as Gosford) and was 12 laps ahead of schedule. I was feeling ok and was pleased to have the 12 lap buffer as it would be foolish to think that I could cover the same number of laps in the last 12 hours as in the first 12.

Louis had warned me about the danger time 2am - 4am when the body wants to shut down, you just had to keep plodding on in the dark and cold and possibly rain. He was right, after about 15.5 hours (about 1.30am) I went into a slump. With almost 9 hours still to go my stride shortened, my legs felt like lead, and I was convinced at that time that I would not achieve it. I was almost asleep on my feet and I was lurching into the second lane. I was running the risk of being pulled off by the medics if I kept that up. Carol and Robin, both Centurions who had been where I was, were great. They had completed their races but chose to stay all night long to support me and hand me drinks, food etc. I am sure that without their support I would not have achieved my goal. I said to Carol I was completely stuffed and she said 'keep going, you haven't done all that training for nothing'. I told Tim (Race Director) that I was shot and he said 'walk through it'. At the time I couldn't imagine that I could walk through how I felt. I asked Robin for a very strong very sweet cup of coffee which seemed to help. I then remembered the MP3 player, which I left in the caravan in case I needed it. I had done most of my training listening to music and felt walking to a beat helped.

What happened next amazed me. With almost 9 hours to go til the finish I put the headphones in to listen to Dire Straits (how appropriate - I was in dire straits at the time). As soon as 'Brothers in Arms' started I lifted my pace to walk in time with the music. I literally went from half dead to flying - sub 3-minute laps with 8.5 hours to go. I began lapping people who were lapping me just half an hour before. Someone commented on my pace and I said Robin must have put some illicit drugs in the coffee - I had to quickly assure the chap that I was joking, as I did not want to be pulled off for a swab.

I kept this pace up for a while and I made up the few laps I lost during my slump, and was over 12 laps ahead of my schedule with 7 hours to go. At that time I thought perhaps I might be able to achieve it.

Carol was SMS-ing my sister and son about my progress and she was reading replies from my family to me trackside as I went past to the amusement of the other competitors. It was great to know that other people were thinking of me during the event and how good to know that my son was taping the Brumbies game for me! My sister was ringing my 90-year-old Mum in Bathurst late into the night advising her how I was going. I found out later that mum and my wife were lying awake praying for me about the time I had my slump, so it might not have been the coffee or Dire Straits that perked me up?

In the last 4 hours Tim was advising each walker who had a chance of reaching the 100 miles how they were going, how many laps they had covered in the last hour, how many still to go and how many they would have to average per hour in the time left. This was very helpful. With 4 hours left, I had to cover 51 laps to get to the 100 miles, an average of just under 13 per hour. I felt at that time I could do it. I was feeling very tired and Dire Straits were not having the magic effect of several hours earlier but I kept telling myself that I had done numerous 4 hour walks and this was just another, besides it was now less than 2 laps of the lake to go!

Two hours to go, now only 21 laps to cover. I knew that, unless one of my legs fell off I was going to do it. I was now extremely tired. Jens Borello the Danish walker who was already a triple Centurion in 3 different countries and who had flown to Australia just for the event encouraged me saying that everyone else felt exactly how I was feeling. I found tucking in behind Jens or the extraordinary Deryck Skinner from South Australia who achieved his

first Centurion at the age of 72 last year (the oldest person ever to do so) and who was heading for his second at age 73 with apparent ease, or multi-Centurion Queenslander Geoff Hain was a great help to me in the last hours – something I never had on my solitary training walks. I found all the ultra walkers to be thorough gentlemen and it was a pleasure to be on the track with them.

Somehow I managed to string together 17 laps in the 22nd hour and as the clock ticked over to 23 hours Tim said ‘You have only got 4 laps to go’. I can’t describe how great this made me feel, I knew now that my dream would be a reality! It was great, other competitors were patting me on the back and shaking my hand and encouraging me, I had never experienced anything like it.

They had a tripod set up at the 100-mile mark for photos. I had watched Jens finish 8 laps ahead of me and he chose not to continue on to the 24 hours. I decided I would continue just in case they had miscounted the laps and, besides, it was a 24-hour race, not a 100-mile race. I’m glad I made that decision because it meant that in the end I turned out to be the overall winner on distance.

Coming down the straight with one lap to go I got rid of the hat and asked Carol how my hair was for the photo. Next lap 100 metres from the 100 miles Carol appeared with a comb and offered it to me. I said you are my crew you can comb it so she was walking next to me combing my hair. I passed through the 100-mile mark in 23 hours 14 minutes 03 seconds, the 53rd person to complete the feat in Australia since 1938. I will never be able to describe how I felt. I had done it, my statement on 17 January to my family about becoming the next Australian Centurion had come to pass!

The pressure was now off and I strolled around the track for another 45 minutes eventually reaching 165.605 Km in the 24 hours. I was amazed to later discover that this distance would have placed me 3rd in the 24-hour run. Carol passed me the mobile and suggested I ring Marg which I did while I was still on the track. I was almost in tears as I spoke about what I had just achieved.

I found out at the presentation that I was provisionally third in the Australian 100 Km Championship, which was incorporated into the 24-hour event. Geoff Hain and I were on the same lap at the 100 Km mark and they will have to do a manual check of the times to see which of us was ahead. I was also awarded the Jack Webber trophy for the most meritorious performance in the Centurion 24-hour event. I don’t know a lot about Jack except that he was the second Australian to achieve a Centurion performance in 1971.

As I passed the 100-mile mark my training partner Sharon asked ‘What’s next?’ to which I replied ‘The 48 hour and the Colac Six Day!’ Some people I didn’t know looked at me strangely (as an ultra walker you get used to such looks). But I was only joking, I think.....

Pat Fisher , C 53, 11 May 2006

Pat fronted for the annual Sri Chinmoy 24 Hour event in Adelaide 5 months later in October 2006 and walked a distance of 101.055 km before retiring. He started in a few further events after this but back issues thwarted his attempts.

A keen member of our Australian Centurions, he follows our activities with interest but now has to restrict himself to club walking with the ACT Racewalking Club in Canberra.