

SANDRA DE GRAAFF (C69) AND ALBERTUS VAN GINKEL (C70)

Our two newest Australian Centurions are Dutch walkers Sandra de Graaff (C69 23:45:32) and Albertus van Ginkel (C70 23:46:36). They became Australian Centurions in our 2016 qualifying event at Coburg on the weekend of 16-17 April of that year. Read on to find out a bit more about Sandra and Bertus.

Bertus started long distance walking in 1989, when he joined the Nationale Reserve in the Netherlands. His sergeant-major was looking for volunteers to walk in the Nijmegen 4 Day Classic and wanted single people who would have time to train and compete in the event. That was the start of it all for Bertus who competed in the army team in the next two Nijmegens.

In February 1991, a fellow-walker asked him if he would like to participate in a 75km Euraudax walk. He had not walked since a 15km stroll in September 1990 but he said yes and duly completed the walk, albeit with blisters and a lot of effort.

With this walk under his belt, he threw himself into the Netherlands long distance walking circuit. In 1992 he walked his first 100km, the Death March in Belgium. At the end of 1993 he decided he wanted to walk the 1994 200km Euraudax of Brussels so he started training more seriously. This was the first of many Euraudax walks which he completed from 1993 to 2008. In this period, he earned an impressive 31 Golden Eagles (one Eagle requires 4*25km, 3*50km, 2*75km, 10*100km, 2*125km and 2*150km for a total distance of 1950km). Additionally, he walked 200km on 13 occasions and completed the 4 day Paris-Tubize (292km in 4 days) on 9 occasions.

At the end of 2007 the French Union Audax (FUA) gave the licence for organizing Audax in The Netherlands to another organisation so he moved on, participating instead in the Kennedymarches (80km) and Long Distance Walks (110km and further). It was there that he and Sandra met.

Sandra had started walking in 2006, doing the Nijmegen 4 Day Classic in 2007 as well as some Kennedymarches. After meeting Bertus, she also started participating in Long Distance Walks like Amsterdam-Leeuwarden (150km) and Nijmegen-Rotterdam (160km). Bertus tells me that in taking Sandra under his belt, according to a fellow walker, he had created a walking monster! Sandra had all the attributes needed to succeed in this challenging sport - natural endurance, a good walking gait and lots of determination.

In May 2010, they walked the 24 Hours of Schiedam, the official Continental Centurions qualifer, but just to get another Long Distance Walker stamp. They stopped for a meal during the night. Further, since Sandra had her wrist in plaster, they had to stop every couple of hours to let the swelling subside. Overall, they covered 109.9km in 22:26:22. It was their introduction to the world of Centurion walking.



May 2010 – Arm in plaster, Sandra participates in her first Continental Centurion walk

In 2011 Bertus decided to try to become a Kennedyvriend by walking 50 miles in 12 hours. This was a big challenge for him as his previous Kennedymarches had been done in 15 to 17 hours. His Euraudax background did not stand him in good stead as most Euraudax walks were done at a speed of around 6km/hour, with a pause of up to 10 minutes each hour. It did not make for fast walking. *“Euraudax is called the nursing home for Long Distance Walkers. To prove them wrong I wanted to become a Kennedyvriend.”* He did just that, walking the first 50 miles in the 2011 Continental Centurions 24 Hour in an impressive 11:42:12 to become Kennedyvriend KV374. On that occasion, Sandra tested herself out with her own faster pace, completing 50km in 8:40:41.

In 2012, they set themselves the following goals – Bertus wanted to become a Continental Centurion and Sandra wanted to qualify as a Kennedyvriend. Alas, the weather in Schiedam in late May was much too hot, with the temperature above 25°C. Bertus decided to walk with Sandra and help her to her goal but leave his centurion challenge for another year. Sandra walked powerfully through to a final 50 mile time of 11:48:40, becoming Kennedyvriend, KV 396. With this box ticked, Bertus walked on, reaching a 24 Hour total of 147.214km, not too bad under the circumstances.



2012 – tough conditions did not stop Sandra earning Kennedyvriend KV396 and Bertus completing 147.214 km in Schiedam

In 2013 Bertus decided to give his Centurion quest another try. On this occasion the weather was a fine 17°C and he had his race well planned, covering the first 50 miles in 11:42 and walking through to the 100 mile mark with as few stops as possible (he had one 4 minute stop only). He reached the milestone in 23:47:12 to become Continental Centurion CC399. Sandra walked with him as usual, reaching a distance of 123.164km.



2013 – Bertus crosses the line to become CC399

In 2014 it was Sandra's turn to try for her Centurion badge, with Bertus alongside her as usual, but a number of things conspired against them. The June weather in Schiedam was hot (30°C) and the course was a tough one, with 180 degree turns and steep bridges to be negotiated overnight. It was not going to be their year but they did get to 151.622km, a good effort in the circumstances.

In May 2015, they returned to Weert for the Continental Centurions qualifier and this time everything fell into place. The weather was good and they were amongst the 26 competitors who walked 100 miles or more that weekend. Sandra was now Continental Centurion CC423 with a time of 23:40:38. Bertus followed soon after in 23:45:29, completing his second centurion walk.



May 2015 – Sandra, with Bertus by her side as usual, on her way to badge CC423 in Weert

In August 2015, they travelled to the Isle of Man to compete in the English Centurions qualifier and they were again successful, Sandra being awarded C1160 (23:42:23) and Bertus being awarded C1162 (23:45:18).

I always say that Sandra gets the compressor and turbo working towards the end of the race while I just diesel on.



August 2015 - Sandra and Bertus on their way to another successful hundred in the Isle of Man

They now looked further afield for their next challenge. At the centurions meeting in November 2015, Bertus spoke with Caroline Mestdagh about going to the USA as he thought that the weather in Australia would be too hot. Caroline reassured him that the Australian weather was ok, so he checked it out and it looked promising. Sure, it could be hot but the average temperature in April was not too bad. Decision made – Australia would be their next badge!

They warmed up for Coburg with a Kennedymarch in Sittard in March 2016 – Sandra completed the 50 Miles in an impressive 11:21:16 and Bertus followed with 11:29:16. They were in excellent shape.

They flew into Melbourne 3 days before the Australian Centurions race, had a night's sleep and then ventured forth on the Thursday for a 30km walk along the Capital City Trail which winds its way around inner Melbourne. A day out and a pleasant stroll to wake the legs up after a very long flight. Not exactly the way I would prepare for a 24 hour walk but one which obviously worked for them!

Come the Saturday morning at Coburg and they were ready to walk together as per their usual plan. But it had to be a bit different this time. Normally they walked side by side but, as the rules for track races dictate you can't walk this way, they decided to walk one behind the other. Our other new centurion, Rob Robertson of USA (C68) joined “the train” and the other walkers joined in for the occasional lap whenever they could. It was an impressive site to see them working together for the entire 24 Hours.

Sandra and I normally walk side by side. The Coburg race rules stated that we had to walk behind each other. So that is how it became a train. Women like to be in charge so I let Sandra walk in front. In the night I took over as she was walking slightly slower than required. Later she went to the front again and we had enough in reserve to finish in time. During the last hour I had problems with the sun and Sandra got the compressor and turbo started. You know the results.

The final result – Sandra reached her hundred in 23:45:32 to become AC69 and Bertus was close behind with a time of 23:46:36, becoming AC70.

Their successful walk at Coburg was their third centurion finish in only 11 months – a very impressive feat. And a week later they were back in action in a Kennedymarch in Ridderkerk. *“Not a brilliant time, but another 80km in the pocket. We were not too tired.”*



April 2016 – Sandra, Bertus and Rob Robertson get “the train” going at Coburg

And they have no plans to take a rest yet – they plan to walk in the Continental Centurions 24 Hours in Schiedam in May. *“We will be doing it easy, with a Kennedymarch in the week before. If the weather is ok, we will try for 100 miles, otherwise we will just walk for 24 hours.”*

Jill Green rang me a few days ago to say hello and to tell me a little more about Bertus's exploits. She told me he was a regular in the Danish 7 Day Walk and that he and Sandra were regulars in the annual Welsh International Four Days Walk and were often the only foreign walkers there.

Final words to Bertus with a quick summary of his absolutely fantastic career:

I have done 495 walks of 100 km or more. My total mileage at the moment stands at 158.844 km. Speed is not my thing (I like to walk at about 6 km per hour) but discipline is. I have walked fast twice this year (Sittard and Coburg). The rest are for enjoyment.

Sandra is also amassing a very impressive list of Long Distance Walk finishes and looks like being around for some time! Their shared goal is to build up their centurion badge count which sits currently at 3 but is sure to rise quickly as they target more key events around the world.

Tim Erickson
Tuesday 3 May 2016