

AUSTRALIAN CENTURION FOUNDERS

LEN MATHEWS

Len Mathews is known as one of the founders of the Australian Centurions club but what do we really know of Len. I am indebted to Jack Webber who passed on information to me about Len. This information was found in an old Surrey Walking Club newsletter and has been expanded as required to complete the picture.

Len Mathews was born in 1893 in England. We know little of his early life until he joined the Croydon Athletic Club in 1908. He was one of the many young people inspired by the 1908 Olympic Games in London. In 1909 he ran a 3 miles flat handicap at the Muswell Hill Busmen's Sports and ran in the Boxing Day 1910 Marathon Race promoted by the Surrey A.C. The distance was 23 miles and he was the first novice to finish. His time was 2 hours 36 minutes 38 secs and he was actually seventh in a field of 23. At this time, Len was 17 years old.

He was then advised by his fellow members of the Croydon A.C. that he was considered too young for running such long distances and so he decided to switch to walking. Thus he came into contact with the Surrey Walking Club. His first walking race was in the S.W.C. Open Boxing Day Godstone and Back in 1911. He won a flower pot as the first novice to finish. His time was 3 hours 11 mins.

In February 1912, he won his first open race prize, 12 miles North London Harriers from the Bruce Castle, Tottenham. Tommy Hammond congratulated him on this fine style and fair walking. His next open race two weeks later was the Amalgamated Press A.C. 7 miles from the Baring Hall Hotel, Grove Park. He won the handicap and his time was 50 mins 51 secs.

Len then went to Australia. To his dismay, he found that there were no amateurs, not athletic clubs and no associations. At this point, he was right on top of the world and had to find some outlet for this energy and enthusiasm for walking. He did the only thing possible by creating the conditions that would give him the athletics he craved for. The Adelaide Harriers and Walking Club was formed, Len being the founder. When forming a club in the wilderness, you have to be very cunning. To start a walking club is just asking for trouble, but to start an athletic club is simple in comparison. You then, by a little persistence, allow a walking race to creep into the program and eventually get just a little interest in race walking. By the time that all the organizing had been done, you are not fit for anything, let alone a walking race.

In order to take part in the Australian Championships in 1914, a South Australian A.A.A. had to be formed and a Championship Meeting had to be held. This latter was held in Adelaide in October 1913. Len was second in the 3 mile walk in 23 mins 38 secs. The race was won by R.F. Stokes. Stokes and Mathews then represented South Australia in the Aust Championships in Melbourne in the 3 mile track race. Alfred Picard of Sydney won the race and Stokes was third.

Back in Adelaide, a 7 mile race was held in 107 degrees in the shade. During this race, Stokes did 32 mins 1.6 secs for 4 miles and 40 mins 8 secs for 5 miles, beating A. O. Barrett's Australian records by 12 secs and 31 secs respectively.

At the end of 1914, Len left Adelaide with amateurism firmly established, very much to the dismay of the professionals. His new wilderness was Sydney, in so much that there was no club like the Surrey Walking club there. There were some good clubs like the East Sydney A.A.C. and South Sydney A.C. The Sydney Walkers Club was more or less on its last legs and nobody was the least bit interested in race walking. So of course, Len had to start a new club. This was called the New South Wales Walking and Field Games club.

The best thing in connection with the club was that the members had some really good long strolls. They were mostly through the Blue Mountains and Southern Highlands. There were some very good racewalkers in the club, including Alf Pickard, Bob Bonham, Sid Sheaves, A. A. Austin and Bob Stokes. All of these were at one time or another State Champions. Len was, of course, the main organizer of the new walking club and had very little time left get himself really fit for the actual racing itself, but at least he had the satisfaction of seeing that race walking was set on its feet once again and has, in fact, flourished ever since.

In 1917, Len became a "5 bob a day tourist", joined the AIF and went to France. On his discharge, he went into his uncle's business in Leicester. As usual, there was no real walking club in that area. He did, however, turn out in the 1 mile flat championship of Leicestershire and won it. (Incidentally he had left Adelaide as the 1 and 3 mile track running champion and the 5 miles cross-country champion of South Australia).

In 1919, Len formed the Leicestershire Walking And Field Games Club and this was the start of walking in that area. Over the next few years, he regularly competed in the English racing scene and was highly placed on many occasions.

In 1921, Len had to reside in Edinburgh, once again in the wilderness and possibly the hardest place in the world to get anyone to take up our sport. So just for fun, he walked from Edinburgh to Glasgow; then from Edinburgh to Dundee, just a matter of 60 miles; then around the coast of Fife. He then raced from Glasgow to Edinburgh with Scottish AAA officials in the splendid time of 7 hours 46 mins for 44.5 miles. All this was just to stir up the natives and to show them just what they were missing. Most of these efforts were, however, in vain as the Scots expressed very little interest in the sport.

Len was then on the move again, this time to Luton in the Midlands. He settled here and stayed for many years. There, first as a competitor, then as a race organizer and official and coach, he was always prominent in the sport. He was rewarded in 1934 with the Presidency of the Midlands R.W.A.. He was always available as an official, either as a timekeeper or as a judge. For several years he organized the Midland Counties A.A.A. Championships and other sports. He officiated in over 20 London-to-Brighton and in some 6 Brighton-And-Back walks.



This photo, from the March 1934 Edition of *Sport and Play and Wheel Life* shows Len back row fifth from left holding a framed certificate on the occasion of the presentation to Tebbs Lloyd-Johnson of the cup for winning the Midlands Senior Ten Miles Road Walking Championship.

He was involved at many levels. One of his major coaching achievements was in coaching Derek Reynolds who ran 154 miles 1226 yards on the London University Oval in November 1953. He was also with him on his record-breaking run from London to Brighton and back (104 miles).

Now most people would have faded into the background at this stage but there is an amazing appendix to this story. In 1960, at 66 years of age, he completed the hundred miler from Leicester to Skegness in 23 hours 40 mins and 45 seconds in what was recorded as an absolute triumph of sheer guts and willpower. He qualified as British Centurion Number 316 and was recorded as the oldest ever new Centurion after a long (two year) preparation of road work, carefully prepared and supervised by Alec Potton. With the team of Potton, Frost and Fullager in support throughout the race, a schedule skillfully worked out and every want anticipated, Len demonstrated that with the right training and will and determination, the target can be reached.

Rather than rest on his laurels, Len added weight training and hill climbing to his walking training and returned the next year to finish the hundred miler once again in A FASTER TIME!.

At some stage in the 60's, Len migrated once again to Australia and settled in Glenelg in South Australia. As athletics and race-walking were now firmly established in Australia, Len looked for something else of a unique nature that he could add and he thought of the Centurions Club of which he was a proud member. How about an Australian equivalent.

In the early seventies, Len met with fellow Centurion member Fred Redman, along with Tom Daintry and Brian Parkinson and the Australian Centurions were born. At that stage Len was nearly 80 but his enthusiasm was still catching.

Our archival records show a last entry from Len dated 19/05/1978 in which he wrote to Club secretary Mike Porter to congratulate new Centurions Bill Dyer and Claude Martin. He passed away on 15 June 1983 in his 90th year.

Len has long since passed on but the Australian Centurions Club (his last great contribution) remains as his legacy and memorial.

Info on Len's AIF career

AIF Service Number: 20502

Served as a Lance Corporal in the 6th Bridge and Railway Dispatch Company on the Western Front.

Enlisted 16 November 1917. Discharged 2 October 1919.