

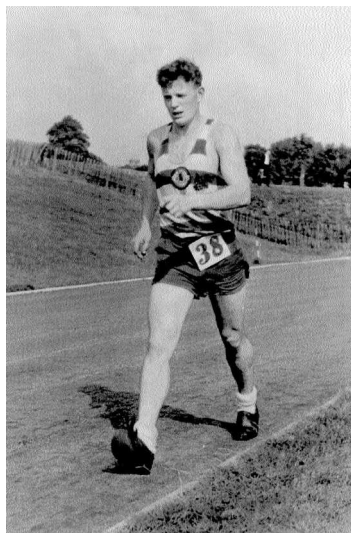
VALE FRED BROOKS (C42) : 1934 - 2022

Fredrick Charles (Fred) Brooks was born on January 6th 1934 in Birmingham as one of 11 children and grew up in a small two story terrace house in an impoverished working class area of that city. Although he liked school, it was not a long academic career and he left at age 15 to train as a bricklayer, specializing in the fireworking inside furnaces.

Inspired by the heroics of the athletes competing in the 1948 Olympic Games in London, he joined Lozells Harriers, one of the Midlands athletics clubs, and enjoyed a number of years as a track and cross country runner. He also took on the role of club secretary in the mid fifties and worked hard to make Lozells Harriers one of the top clubs in Warwickshire. Fred was busy on several fronts around that time – Feb 26th 1955 saw him marry Lill and form a partnership that would last 54 years.

Fred's entrance into walking ranks was unusual to say the least. In 1957, after kidding a bunch of walkers that anybody could walk 6 miles in an hour, he put himself on the line, recording a distance of 6 miles and 52 yards in a Highgate Harriers 1 Hour championship event. This marked the start of his walking career which he enthusiastically embraced. He improved quickly and a year later could boast a win in the Midlands 10 Mile Open walk and a fourth place in the 1958 Leicester to Mercury 20 Mile event (2:54:07). He had sourced his walking shoes from Harold Whitlock, the 1936 Olympic 50km champion, and he approached Harold at this time for coaching help. Various correspondences ensued and Harold took him under his wing.

He maintained his position in the British racewalking rankings over 2 miles, 3 miles, 10 miles and 20 miles for the next 3 years. He had plenty of speed (he regularly walked around 36 minutes for 5 miles) and had natural endurance. He walked in the golden era of English walking and competed against the likes of Stan Vickers, Don Thompson, Ken Mathews, Frank O'Reilly, Alf Poole and the many other famous names of that time.



Fred's first walk in 1957 – 6 miles and 52 yards in the Highgate Harriers 1 Hour championship

Life as a bricklayer was not a steady trade in the midlands at that time and in winter when the weather turned foul, tradies like Fred was just as likely to be put off work. Yet in 1961 when he was finally offered a job as bricklayer foreman and some job certainty (“a job for life”) he had to sit down and think about his future. Not really wanting to be tied down in Birmingham for the rest of his working life, he came home that night with the necessary papers for migration to Australia and said to Lill “How about it”. They filled in the forms that evening and the future direction was set.

With their 2 small children in tow, they soon embarked as “Ten Pound Poms”, intending to look for work in Sydney. Making friends on the boat, their plans changed and the destination port was changed to Adelaide. Initially housed at the migrant hospice at Glenelg, Fred spent a lot of time chasing jobs and his walking opportunities were few. But in his occasional forays into the local racewalking scene, he made his presence felt with State Championship wins and State Walking records.

The following photo, taken at the start of the 1961 South Australian 10,000m walk championship at the Adelaide Harriers track, shows Fred at the front right in an Adelaide Harriers singlet. Directly behind him is Eddie Folland (second from right) who was the State Record Holder till Fred beat it that day, and behind Eddie is **Jack Webber (C 2)** (extreme right). The walker next to him on the front row is Peter Witham who represented South Australia many times

in the LBG and the tall walker next to him is Frank Leonard who gained places in the Australian Two miles and 3000m Championships. Also in the photo but obscured by Fred is **Geoff Peters (C 20)** and Dean Knight who was a very good Junior Walker (Fred coached Dean from when he was a 15yo until 1964).



Eventually, the difficulty of finding ongoing work in Adelaide was too much and in 1966 the family moved to Melbourne. He joined Ivanhoe Harriers for a brief time but it was short lived and he marks 1966 as his retirement year from racewalking. Work and family priorities now took precedence.

In the seventies, he took up soccer and was immediately successful, winning a couple of Best and Fairest awards with his club. He eventually turned to coaching and travelled to Palmerston North in New Zealand to study for his full English Soccer Coaching badge in 1979. Armed with this accreditation, he was able to move into the Australian Soccer Federation as a staff coach. Of course, this was the day of the volunteer and he still worked full time as a bricklayer and spent his spare time working in the soccer arena.

In 1982, he took a Victorian Junior side on a New Zealand tour and returned undefeated. In 1985 he was the Coaching Director for the Brisbane North and Districts Soccer Association. In 1987, he was the Under 12 Development Coach for the Victorian Soccer Federation. His coaching involved many moves and I remember him telling me that he and Lill moved house 23 times in their married life.

He was instrumental in developing the first junior soccer program in Australia and travelled the State as part of his role in the Victorian Junior Soccer Association. The McDonalds Soccer SuperSkills Award Scheme, initiated in 1982, to develop grass roots soccer, kept him very busy and saw thousands of young children exposed to soccer as a sport.

He continued his soccer associations until 1994 when he finally felt it was time to move on. Living at Bunyip in country Victoria at the time, he swapped codes to Australian Rules Football, becoming secretary of the Bunyip Football Club.

It was not until 1996 that he made a return to walking at the Veteran level and rekindled his friendship with the likes of Jack Webber. When he moved from Bunyip to Berwick in 1999, he found that there was no local athletics club so promptly founded the Berwick Veterans Athletics Club, based at the Edwin Flack Reserve. Over the next 10 years, he lobbied tirelessly for an all-weather track to replace the existing grass surface. In 2010, this was finally approved, with the fully synthetic track finally opening for business in 2014. Sadly for Fred, he had already returned to England to live by that time (more of that below) so could not join in the celebrations in person.

I first met Fred in 1996 when he came down to watch **Robin Whyte (C 29)** and **Merv Lockyer (C 30)** qualify as Centurions. Fred was inspired by what he saw and advised me at the time that he would be back the next year. But other things intervened and we had to wait 5 years for that promise to be fulfilled.

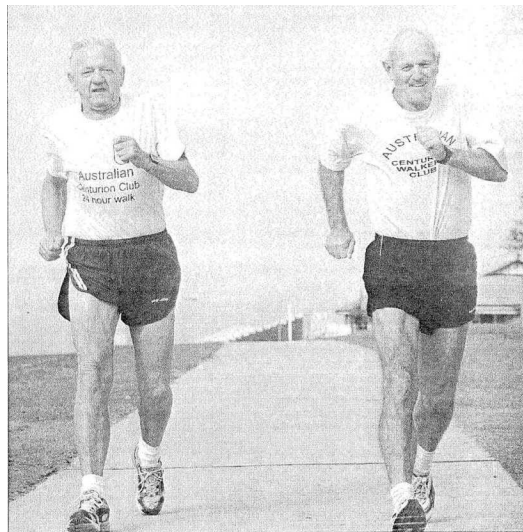
Fred was certainly an unconventional trainer in many ways. Rather than avail himself of the hilly bush tracks or quiet parkland around his home in Berwick, he trained instead round his suburban block. *"It's 401m around my block and the standard track is 400m so I've got one extra metre up my sleeve."* The letter box at his front gate was used to store water bottles and Mars bars and a convenient toilet stop was never more than half a block away. He used to start his block circling at 5am in summer and a little later in winter. Little did he know at the time that he also shared his block with Stan Miskin, one of Australia's greatest ultra runners and a member of the Australian centurions.

"I used to see this man walking around and around the block", Stan said, wondering *"who is that idiot that keeps*

walking round in circles”. Stan then discovered the Berwick Veteran's Athletic Club, which had recently been setup. “I went to a meeting and who was running the show but this same bloke I had seen running around the block”. This was the start of what has been an enduring and close friendship between these two walkers.

Stan immediately started preparing Fred for his Centurion attempt, the target being the Coburg 24 Hour Carnival on 7-8 April 2001. The preparation was thorough – they did long and consistent mileages over the 4 month leadup period – and it was no surprise when Fred powered through the 100 miles to become Australian Centurion 42. As an added bonus, he became at 67 years of age our oldest qualifier. His 50 mile splits were very even and his final time of 22:31:15 was excellent. It was a real strength walk. He also set new Australian M65 running records for 12 hours, 50 miles, 100 km and 100 miles even though he walked rather than ran!

As an aside, Stan was just as impressive, finishing with a final distance of **142.791 km**, and blitzing the previous Australian M75 running record of 132.8 km, held by Aussie running legend Drew Kettle. Along he way, he also broke Drew's records for 12 hour, 50 miles and 100 km. A fitting achievement at the age of 75 – again done as a walker!



Stan and Fred at the time of Fred's successful centurion walk in 2001

Inspired by his walk, Fred penned the following poem which was published in one of our newsletters. Of course, it needed to be read with Fred's Midlands accent for the full effect!

Now that I am retired,
It's almost as bad as being fired!
But what can I do to carry on?
How about becoming a Centurion.

So it's up the training, up the pace.
I'm going to try this Centurion race.
Heel and Toe, Heel and Toe
Around and around the streets I go.
Neighbours, strangers give me funny stares
but I am training to be a Centurion – who cares.

Sometimes I am joined by my mate Stan,
He's done it so he helps me all he can.
I will do my damnest and try my best
and until then I won't rest.
And at the end of all this carry on,
I hope to become a Centurion.

Then I receive a leg injury that lays me low.
How I got it, I don't know.
Off to the doctor, a diagnosis and scan.
It will be nine more days till I am back with Stan.

Two weeks to go, all the hard work is done.
I will be glad to hear the bang of the starter's gun.
The apprehension, the fear of the unknown, in this
Centurion race
Is the journey that I have to face.

So I have toiled and slugged for 24 hours
And I am here at last in the showers.
A Centurion at last for all to see.
I owe it all to my wife and me.

Upon earning his Centurions badge in 2001, Fred quickly became one of our most enthusiastic members, coming up with lots of new and innovative ideas and working hard to raise the club's profile in Australia. But his endeavours were not restricted just to us. In 2002, he became records officer and Victorian delegate for the Australian Ultra Runners

Association (AURA) and, in 2003, was judged the recipient of the inaugural Bryan Smith Memorial Award by AURA for his administrative work. The AURA magazine noted: *“No one ever thought they would see the day when Fred would be lost for words but he was speechless when it was announced.”*

In December 2003, I mooted the idea of setting up Australian Masters ultra distance walking records and called for a volunteer to help with the task. Robin Whyte took in the role of Records Officer and we started trolling through the old results but it was soon obvious to us all that Fred was driving the agenda. It took 8 months before we could announce the inaugural record holders and Robin then stood aside to allow Fred to take on the official role as Records custodian. Fred immediately got busy producing record certificates and oversaw the entire records process for the next few years until Lill's failing health forced him to stand aside. In June 2005, Fred took on the additional role of AURA Secretary. It is fair to say that his enthusiasm was seemingly without limit.

His last ultra walk, in the Australian 48 Hour Championship, was held in August 2005 at the Sports Super Centre in Runaway Bay, Queensland. Coping with Lill's increasing frail health, he managed to get in enough training to make the start line and from then on, it was a case of how far could he go. Fred strode through the 24 hours mark with 151.600 km (4th at that stage), passed the 100 miles mark in 25:37:16 to break Cliff Young's M70 mark of 30:49:10 and was on track to break the 200 km and 48 hour records when he suffered a fall at 176.000 km. He was forced to withdraw from the event at that stage but his effort was deemed to be so meritorious that he won the Golden Boot award for best performance. He also set a number of new M70 walking records along the way.



Fred Brooks receives the Golden Boot award from event organiser Ian Cornelius

In late 2005, Fred and Stan approached me with the idea of a trophy in honour of C1 Gordon Smith and we duly setup the Gordon Smith Memorial Award. The inaugural winner was Deryck Skinner C50 and the trophy has been presented each year since.

It was no surprise when Fred's many contributions were recognised and he was chosen to carry the Queen's Commonwealth Games relay baton on 2nd March 2006 as it passed through Berwick. At this time, he was broadening his range of activities, raising money for teenagers with learning difficulties and donating monies from pamphlet deliveries to local charities and generally involving himself in whatever worthy causes caught his attention.



Fred and Stan in wheelchair mode in 2006 – raising awareness with a Wheelchair Dash fundraiser

Early in 2006 he was diagnosed as having an irregular heart beat and, at the age of 72, was forced to contemplate retirement from ultra walking. Only a few months later and aged 81, Stan Miskin, also under advice from a cardiologist, announced his retirement from ultras. How closely the final stages of their careers had been intertwined!

In 2007, Fred downsized house and shifted to Cranbourne North to be nearer Lill who was now to be moved to a nursing home. His support of Lill was a full time commitment and he accepted it fully and loved her to the end.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Fred became involved in 2008 in the City of Casey's Positive Ageing Champions Program and, in January 2009, completed a 300km walk around the City of Casey to show that older members of the community can still get out and enjoy life. Aged 75, he did 54 hours of walking overall over 4 days.



A newspaper cutting of Fred after his 300km walk around the City of Casey

Fred's biggest challenge was spent nursing his wife Lill through the last years of her life as she battled the debilitating effects of Parkinson's disease. When she finally died in June 2009, Fred travelled back to England to see his and her families. It was then that he made the decision to return home. With his Melbourne house sold, he booked his return to Birmingham after a 49 year sojourn in Australia.

But that was not the end of Fred's association with our Australian Centurions Club. He made a number of family trips back to Australia over the next few years, always ensuring that he caught up with us and attended our dinners. I also caught up with Fred in Birmingham in both 2012 and 2017, while on my own holiday trips.



Left: Tim catches up with Fred in Birmingham in 2012

Right: Fred (back row second from right) back in Melbourne and having lunch with the Melbourne based centurions

Fred's "retirement" back home in Birmingham was as active as ever, as he found new endeavours to which he could contribute. He researched and wrote various articles for the local historical society, including reminiscences on growing up in the working class Birmingham suburb of Nechells and his experiences as a wartime child evacuee. He gave talks

on local history and even wrote up his own life story, just for his family. I have a copy and have browsed its pages on more than one occasion.

Fred suffered a deterioration in health in his final years and had a number of stays in hospital, for mainly heart related issues. But his indomitable spirit saw him bounce back on each occasion before time eventually caught up with him this year. To quote his son John:

Dad (Fred) passed away peacefully in his sleep on Wednesday 14th September at 11am in Heartlands Hospital, Birmingham. He had been in hospital for about 8 weeks after having some heart issues and then suffering a fall. I was with him when he passed.

Fred packed so much into his 88 years and never eased back on the throttle, right to the end. His life is an inspiration to us.

I am so pleased that Fred could spend his final years within the love and care of his family in Birmingham. To them we pass on our sincere condolences.

We as Centurions will remember Fred as a fine athlete, a firm friend and as someone who lived his life to the full.

Tim Erickson
Friday 16th September 2022