

**AUSTRALIAN MASTERS' ATHLETICS CHAMPIONSHIPS.**  
**(A historical summary by Bryan Thomas).**

Australian Veterans' or Masters' Athletics Championships have been conducted in one of the state capitals almost every Easter since 1973, the only exceptions being the inaugural event in December 1973 and Townsville 1995 when it was several weeks after Easter. The 'Nationals' now include all track and field events, a road walk and cross-country conducted in five-year age groups while an official social function is always an important and popular component. In 2002 the championships changed its name from Australian Veterans' to Australian Masters' Athletics Championships.

**Melbourne, 1973:** The **inaugural championships**, held at Box Hill bitumen track over a December weekend, were for men over 40years-of-age conducted in three 10year age groups (40-49, 50-59 and over 60). However, there were also events for pre-veteran men from 35 to 39. A large team of USA masters participated in the championships.

**Sydney, 1974:** The **2<sup>nd</sup> annual Australian Championships** were at the new track at Hensley Athletics Field in Botany, Sydney and were held in atrocious weather over the Easter weekend. Official events were still restricted to men over 40 and conducted in 10year age groups. The most significant outcome of the championships was the establishment of the Australian Association of Veteran Athletic Clubs (AAVAC).

**Adelaide, 1975:** The **3<sup>rd</sup> annual championships** were held at Olympic Park, Kensington. More than 200 men participated in events conducted in 5year age groups for the first time, however athletes over 60 were grouped together in one age group.

**Brisbane, 1976:** Mt Gravatt Track was the venue for the **4<sup>th</sup> championships**. Four WA athletes made the long trip to Brisbane ensured these championships were definitely 'national'. As in Adelaide events were conducted in 5year age groups up to the over 60s. An important milestone in the evolution of our sport was that a small number of women were permitted to participate in non-championship events.

**Perth, 1977:** Glorious weather favoured the **5<sup>th</sup> championships** at Perry Lakes Stadium. Jack Pennington (current ACT patron) won the 'unofficial' 10km cross-country race. Until now cross-country had always been separate from track and field but it was proposed that it be incorporated into next year's championships.

**Melbourne, 1978:** Women and pre-veteran men (M35) participated in non-championship events during the **6<sup>th</sup> championships** at Olympic Park. Following the success of the trial in Perth a 10km cross-country was officially incorporated into the championships.

**Sydney, 1979:** The **7<sup>th</sup> championships** were held at the Hensley Track in Botany. Women were officially permitted to participate in the championships for the first time.

**Adelaide, 1980:** The **8<sup>th</sup> championships** were conducted at Olympic Park. Although several Canberra and Tasmanian athletes had competed previously it was not until now they had the opportunity to represent their territory or state club at the ‘nationals’.

**Brisbane, 1981:** It was decided at the AAVAC AGM held during the **9<sup>th</sup> championships** that Canberra would be the venue for a combined 12<sup>th</sup> Australian and 2<sup>nd</sup> Oceania Veterans’ Athletics Championships at Easter 1984.

**Perth, 1982:** Five Canberrans made the long trek across the Nullarbor to participate in the **10<sup>th</sup> championships** and its president Peter Frylink surprised everyone by winning a silver medal in the M45 shot put.

**Melbourne, 1983:** The fledging ACT club, apprehensive about organizing next year’s joint Australian and Oceania Championships, asked the AAVAC AGM held in conjunction with the **11<sup>th</sup> championships** not to incorporate both events, but the meeting denied the request.

**Canberra, 1984:** The relatively inexperienced ACTVAC sought and received much assistance from ACTAA and many visitors in conducting the **12<sup>th</sup> Australian and 2<sup>nd</sup> Oceania Veterans’ Championships**. Being joint championships required two sets of awards to be presented in all events. A highlight was the dinner/dance that attracted almost five hundred athletes and friends from all states of Australia as well as NZ.

**Hobart, 1985:** This was the first time the ‘nationals’ had gone to Tassie. Tasmanian Vets were a small and inexperienced club having formed only a month earlier than the ACT (1979) but they conducted an efficient and friendly **13<sup>th</sup> championship**. Most ‘main-landers’ took the opportunity of incorporating a tour of the island following the weekend.

**Adelaide, 1986:** It was so hot during the **14<sup>th</sup> championships** that organizers set up water stations along side the track during distance races. A highlight of the ‘Opening’ was a giant birthday cake and singing “Happy Birthday” to Bill Empey (NSW) who had turned 90 that day. Bill subsequently went about establishing a couple of M90 Australian Records including the 100m in which he was loudly cheered for every one of the 24.1 seconds it took him to complete the race.

**Sydney, 1987:** Nine World and thirty-six Australian Records were broken or established during the **15<sup>th</sup> championships** at E.S. Marks Field. The outstanding athlete was M40 Garry Hand (ACT) who won five gold medals, including two ARs (5000 and 10000m), less than a week after winning the Canberra Marathon in an AR 2.19. NSWVAC introduced two innovations that have since become features of all subsequent championships; they produced a distinctive medal to replace the generic AAVAC medal and organized the first ‘Champion of Champions’ sprint spectacular.

**Brisbane, 1988:** Four months after the euphoria of having participated in the World Championships in Melbourne many athletes were still enthusiastic enough to make the trip north for the **16<sup>th</sup> championships**. It rained heavily all weekend and the few times it

eased the humidity was stifling. Some lucky athletes enjoyed dormitory accommodation on the top floor of QEII and could emerge from warm dry quarters in time for their event then retreat to its comforts as soon as it was completed. It was Bicentenary Year and QVAC had permission to incorporate the official symbol into the championships logo.

**Perth, 1989:** Perth suffers from the ‘tyranny of distance’ so participation tends to be less than at other cities. Numbers at the **17<sup>th</sup> championships** may have also been affected by the large contingent of Aussies planning to attend the World Championships in Eugene, USA a few months later. Nevertheless the standards were impressive with 42 Australian and five World Records being set. Lynn Carter (WA) W40 hammer, Eileen Hindle (WA) W40 80m hurdles, Heather McDonald (V) W35 10km road-walk, Theo Orr (V) M65 steeplechase and Antoinette Shaw (WA) W40 steeplechase set the World Records.

**Melbourne, 1990:** Melbourne always attracts good attendance and Olympic Park was again centre of a very successful **18<sup>th</sup> championship**. Several contentious issues, the most worrying being that Victoria had not paid its affiliation fees, caused the AAVAC AGM to go from 6pm to mid-night. A positive outcome of this long tiring meeting was an agreement that in future such meetings should be separate from the competition.

**Canberra, 1991:** As this was ACT’s second attempt at hosting ‘nationals’ they did things differently; the most significant was setting up a special team whose sole purpose was to organize a successful **19<sup>th</sup> championships**. The track had been removed from Bruce Stadium so the championships were conducted on what used to be the warm-up track. Two World and 19 Australian Records were set during the championships. M55 Bob Gardiner (V) set both World Records with outstanding efforts in the 5000m and 20km race-walks. AAVAC AGM was held on Thursday, allowing delegates to conclude the meeting prior to competition. Till now the president of AAVAC was automatically given to the state organizing next year’s championships. However, AAVAC had a new constitution requiring an elected president, Bryan Thomas (ACT) was elected to the position.

**Hobart, 1992:** Tasmania conducted an efficient and friendly **20<sup>th</sup> championships** and the LOC were thrilled with more than 450 entries and by the seven World Records (six by women) set at their picturesque athletics stadium. It was fitting that local lass, W65 Shirley Brasher set four of the World Records (800, 1500, 5000 and 10,000m), Tom Daintry (V) race-walked to a new M80 world best, Helen Searle (NSW) once again improved her own world mark for the W50 hammer and the following day the strong winds eased just long enough for her mother Ruth Frith to get in a legal W80 triple jump record. However the winds were not so kind to Gwen Davidson (V) when she triple jumped further than any other W65 had done but her magnificent leap could not be ratified as a record.

**Adelaide, 1993:** A crisis confronted the **21<sup>st</sup> championships** when two SA athletes, not members of our association, threatened legal action if not permitted to compete. They were eventually granted leave to do so, but since then entry form wording has changed to overcome this problem and one month later the AAVAC Board decided that in future

non-members can participate at the nationals by paying an extra \$50 on top of the normal entry fees. These championships were also significant as they were first to conduct official competition for M30s. Thirty-one Australian and two World Records (M85 Harry Gathercole (Q) 200m and W35 Pam Matthews (V) hammer) were set.

**Sydney, 1994:** The **22<sup>nd</sup> championships** were held at the new Olympic Games warm-up track in Olympic Park, Homebush. Unfortunately, many throwing events, especially hammer could not be accommodated and were conducted in open fields, lacking shade, seats or water for either athletes or officials.

**Townsville, 1995:** Change in venue and date occurred because it was expected Northern Territory would conduct the **23<sup>rd</sup> championships**. However, they were unable to do so and the states and ACT were reluctant to take on the task at short notice. Fortunately, Queensland Masters Games were willing to incorporate our championships into their inaugural event. Veteran members could enter both our championships and the Games (provided they paid two entry fees) and were eligible for two different medals.

**Perth, 1996:** The **24<sup>th</sup> championships** were the third 'nationals' staged in Perry Lakes Stadium and adjacent parklands.

**Melbourne, 1997:** VVAC decided to conduct the **25<sup>th</sup> championships** efficiently but without the extra 'trimmings'. However, because many visiting athletes were disappointed that a special dinner/dance or social evening had not been included in the program that a later board decision mandated that a welcoming ceremony and a social evening should be important components of future championships. .

**Brisbane, 1998:** Very hot humid conditions and violent thunderstorms stole the show at the **26<sup>th</sup> championships** at ANZ Stadium. One storm was so fierce that some afternoon events were held over until the following morning upsetting the schedules of many competitors. An 'Athletes Forum', that has since become a feature of our annual championships, was conducted for the first time.

**Canberra, 1999:** Two World (Margaret Taylor (ACT) W50 triple jump and Randall Hughes (V) M75 5000m) and 26 Australian Records were set during the **27<sup>th</sup> championships**. Three innovations were - presentation of AAVAC trophies to our most outstanding athletes, introduction of a special 'champion of champions' javelin contest and perhaps most memorable was a Welcoming Ceremony featuring a poetic rendition and a choir singing the national anthem.

**Hobart, 2000:** The **28<sup>th</sup> championships** were so cold our national body agreed that in future Hobart should only conduct them when Easter is relatively early. However, the cold and damp did not affect the efficiency and friendliness of officials and organizers. Competing in the final event, Margaret Taylor (ACT) attracted an interested gallery as each of her triple jump attempts were agonizingly close to the World Record.

**Sydney, 2001:** On five occasions the 'nationals' have been in Sydney they have been held at four different venues; in 1974 and 79 at Hensley Field, in 87 at ES Marks Field, 94 at Olympic Park and the **29<sup>th</sup> championships** at the new Bass Hill Track. Beautiful Indian-summer weather delighted everyone involved. Highlights of the dinner/dance were the stage entertainments by each state.

**Adelaide, 2002:** The **30<sup>th</sup> championships** were first to be known as Australian Masters' Athletics Championships. They were conducted in the new Santos Stadium with its magnificent warm-up area consisting of a three lane 100m track, a grassed slope for hill running, high jump/pole vault fans, javelin runways, throwing cage and circles all within an extensive grass area. Most outstanding athlete of the meet was M80 Mike Johnston (V) who won all his races in fine style including ARs in the 200 and 400m.

**Perth, 2003:** Weather during the **31<sup>st</sup> championships** was glorious. Both road walks and cross-country were conducted on excellent venues adjacent to Perry Lakes Stadium and the dinner cruise on the Swan River was a highlight. The championships produced a World Record and nine new ARs, (eight by women). Margaret Taylor (ACT), having just become a W55 set ARs, in both long and high jump and a WR in the triple jump.

**Melbourne, 2004:** More than 600 competitors made the **32<sup>nd</sup> championships** the largest for many years. A feature of the very successful dinner/dance was the annual presentation of AMA Awards for the 2003 calendar year.

**Brisbane, 2005:** The **33<sup>rd</sup> championships** held at the QEII was blessed with good weather – not always the case when the 'nationals' go north. One World, 21 Australian and a multitude of Championship Records were set. W70 Heather Doherty (Q) set a WR in the throws pentathlon as well as ARs in shot, discus and heavy weight. Organisers appreciated the operation of a call-room and that most states had team managers.

**Canberra, 2006:** The **34<sup>th</sup> championships** attracted almost 500 participants approximately a third of which were women. A striking visual feature was the numerous volunteers clad in their bright red long sleeved shirts. The most senior athlete was 96year-old Ruth Frith (Q) who delivered world-class performances in all six throwing contests while two nonagenarians, Eddie Gamble and Andy Smith from Victoria were oldest male competitors. Canberra was blessed with beautiful autumn weather throughout Easter and each of the competition venues - the AIS Athletics Arena for track and field, the four lap cross-country course at Weston Park and the lakeside paths around Lennox Garden used for the road walks were attractive for competitors and spectators alike. A highlight of the weekend was an enjoyable dinner-dance and presentation evening at the Canberra Club in Civic. Presentation of the annual AMA track and Field Awards (for performances achieved in 2005) was the most important formal feature of the evening.

**Hobart, 2007:** The **35<sup>th</sup> championships** saw the introduction of three new events; the 60m sprint, three additional age bands for relays and 20km road walk available to all walkers. The LOC were thrilled with 431 entries (37.5 females) almost hundred more

than in 2000. The remarkable and inspirational Ruth Frith from Queensland at 97years-of-age was the most senior competitor as she has been for so many championships, while Victorian M85 Ken Matchett was oldest male. Unfortunately M90 Victorian Andy Smith was unable to make it to Hobart and so sadly broke his unique and historic string of having participated in every national championship since they commenced in 1973. Race walker Lyn Ventris (WA) who recently moved up to the W50 age group set two new World Records – 5000mW (23.37.78) and 10km road walk (48.27). The Domain Athletic Centre located on top of a hill with Mt Wellington dominating the background makes this venue one of the most picturesque in the country. The 8km cross-country was held in the area surrounding the stadium and the road walks were conducted on a level stretch of traffic free road through the middle of Kempton, an attractive little village about 45km north. The Dinner- Dance and Awards Evening, always a highlight, was in the ballroom of the Hotel Grand Chancellor over looking Constitution Dock.

**Sydney, 2008:** The 36<sup>th</sup> **championships** were conducted at the Blacktown Olympic Park in western Sydney. The cross-country near Parramatta 26km from the stadium and the road walks along a recreation path within a nature reserve at Greystanes. Periods of heavy rain affected some events, especially the throws and jumps, during the first two days as well as sadly causing the abandonment of the traditional medal presentations. However, despite these difficulties the carnival generally ran to time and a big thank you is owed to officials and volunteers who stood out in the inclement weather for many hours each day. All events were efficiently controlled by NSW Athletics officials prominent in their purple and yellow shirts assisted by an army of young volunteers.

There were many outstanding performances, most notably two World Records; by David Carr (WA) in the M75 steeplechase and a composite women's team for the W35 4x100m relay. Ruth Frith (Q) at 98years-of-age was once again an inspiration performing well in all throwing events.