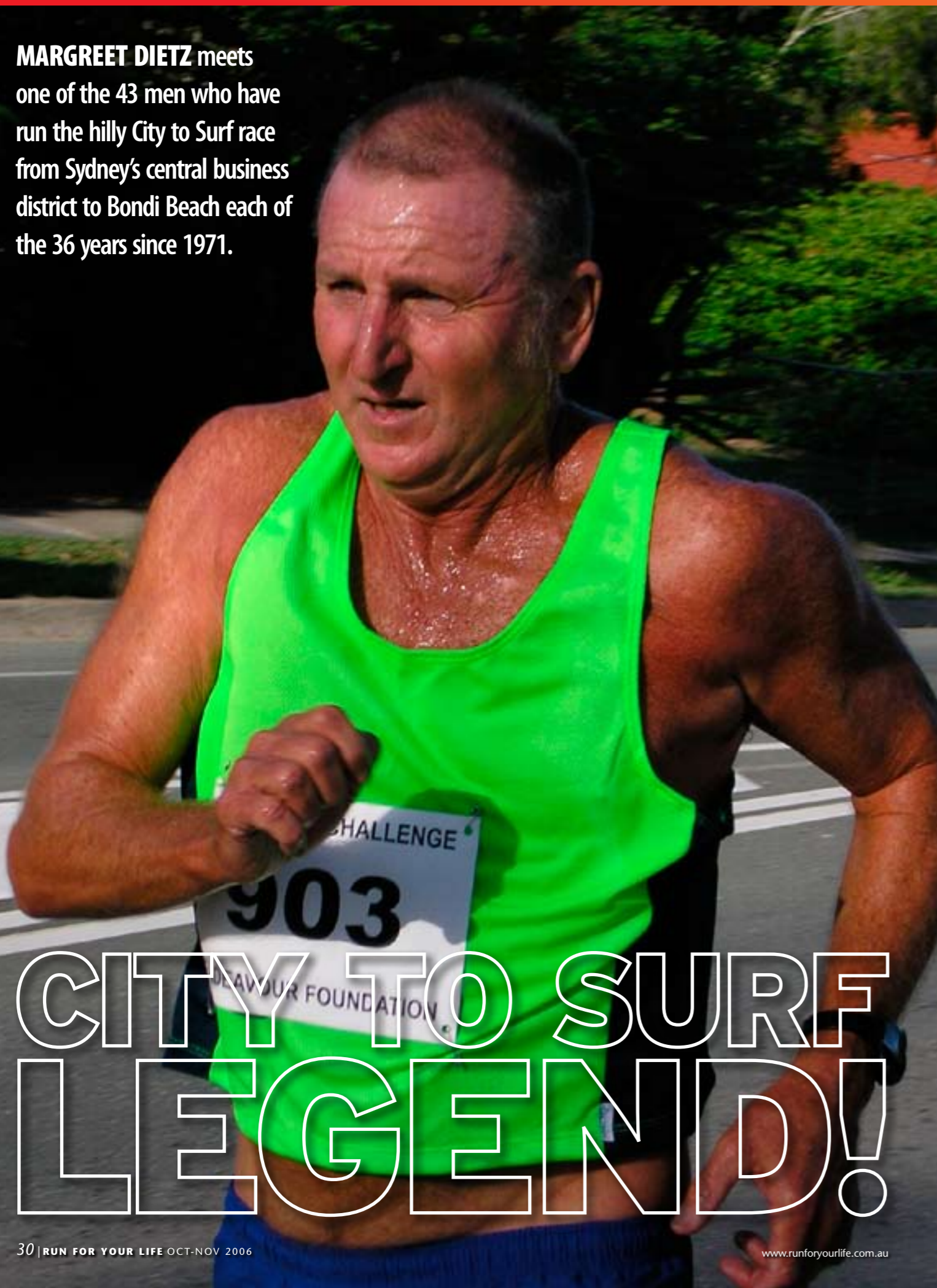


MARGREET DIETZ meets one of the 43 men who have run the hilly City to Surf race from Sydney's central business district to Bondi Beach each of the 36 years since 1971.



CITY TO SURF LEGEND!

"FOR my first 30, I always went under the hour," the 62-year-old says. While the race is now 14 kilometres, it was a kilometre longer during the first few years of the event.

Alan says he didn't consider himself a real runner until after his third City to Surf. Yet, he did have high hopes for the first one.

He ran as part of his training while serving as an Australian Army commando and he was also a member of the North's Joggers club in Balmoral. He was told to keep a close eye on Olympian Ken Moore.

"I had visions of winning the darn thing," Alan says. "I was still with [Ken] at 600 metres. By the time I got to the other side of the Cross I was walking. I wasn't the only one. There were people hanging over fences. The ambulance guys had to do some work because people weren't fit. At Rose Bay I was saying "never again."

Alan finished, and as he drove over the course that same afternoon, he decided he'd return the next year.

"It is the greatest race in the world. It is certainly the best in Australia. It is a hard race. You've got the hills. There is no real place you can settle down really?"

Alan placed about 50th overall in the first few City to Surfs, then he came home in about 75th spot several years and then his place was about 125th for four years, he says.

His best City to Surf performance was when he ran the then 15km course in 53.10, he says. At the time, the course started at Town Hall and there was no tunnel at Kings Cross. His best time for the 14km course is 50.07. He says he should have broken 50 minutes, but it just didn't happen.

"I was always around that 50 minutes. I should have gone under it. Friends of mine would go under it, and I'd always beat them in runs but couldn't handle the City to Surf," he says.

Alan was one of the inaugural members of the North's Joggers club, dubbed the Bears, which started in May 1967. "We'd run, but not that sort of distance [15km]," he says.

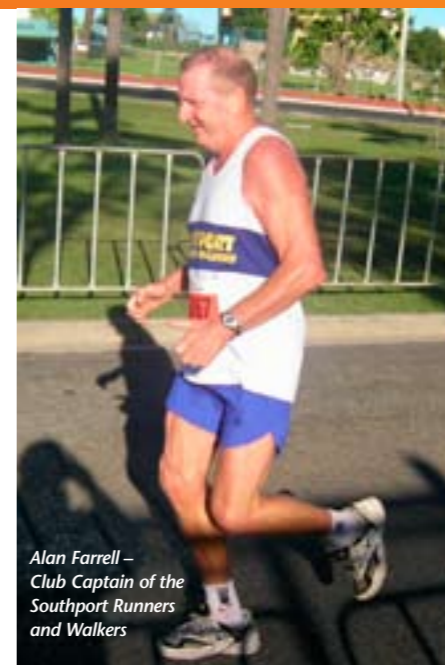
His work kept him fit as well. "There was a lot of running in the commandos. We used to run along the promenade at Balmoral, and there were complaints that running in our army boots was going to break up the path."

The Bears still can lay claim to having four City to Surf legends. Besides Alan, they are Laurie Coleman, Phil Worrall and John Tisdale.

Alan gradually built up his running frequency, he says, but he had only one speed.

"For the first 10 years of my running, it was all hard. People didn't run with me. It was at least 10 years before I realised that you don't have to run flat out every time," he says.

What Alan doesn't say is that he was in the top 3 of the North's Joggers men's open series almost every year. The club's website shows results from 1978 until 2005, and it is easier to count the years that Alan's name is not in the top 3 (1996 and 1997). His name last appears in the top 3 in 1998 after which he moved to Runaway Bay in Queensland.



Alan Farrell - Club Captain of the Southport Runners and Walkers

And even though he claims that his competitive spirit has lessened, it doesn't sound like it. In the 2005 City to Surf he finished in about 62 minutes, only 30 seconds behind the fastest legend, Keith Mayhew.

Before the 2006 City to Surf, "Keith said to me, 'I bet you are going to beat me this year,' but unfortunately the wheels fell off," says Alan, who finished in 68.00. "I had a bad run." Keith ran 67.06. "We both crashed," Alan says.

Alan blames the move from Sydney to Queensland and the lack of hills to train on. His wife Carole has a better explanation. With as many women as men among the more than 63,000 entrants, Alan was simply distracted. In the first City to Surf there were only about 40 women among the 2000 entrants.

"My wife said I wasn't running well because I was stuck among all these pretty girls," Alan says.

In the first eight years of the City to Surf he always beat the first female to the finish line. So he was taken aback when a female runner passed him going up Heartbreak Hill in the 1979 City to Surf. To make matters worse, he didn't recognise her.

"I knew the top girls. I am looking at her and I said 'What's your name?' She said 'Lawrie' with an American accent. I am thinking, who the bloody hell is Lawrie, and I lost a bit of concentration as she disappeared from me. I found out her name was Lawrie Binder, and she was an American Olympian."

Lawrie was the first female home in 49.40 and the first female to break 50 minutes on the course.

As for his wife, Alan considers her to be a City to Surf legend in her own right. "Carole has been to every City to Surf and she has had the hard part because she has had to drop us in the city, drive the car out and park it, and it got further and further away as the number of participants in the race grew."

After dropping Alan off for the race start, Carole and the kids would drive towards Bondi.

"Our ritual was that we would find somewhere to park, drag everything down to the beach, go to the fish 'n' chips shop and buy \$2 worth of chips and

milkshakes. Then we'd sit in the gutter by the finish and the kids would actually count the runners in until Alan finished," Carole says. "Even now the kids say 'Mum don't forget to get your chips.'"

Running has definitely played a large part in the family's life.

"That City to Surf definitely changed my lifestyle," Alan says. "I didn't expect when I ran that first one that I'd still be running 36 years later. It got me a job working in a gym for 23 years, all our social life. I love running and I have become addicted to it."

When Alan switched his commando role for a job at Telstra, he'd run every lunch hour. "People would say to me, 'what do you enjoy about work?' And I would say 'the lunch hour.' It was getting embarrassing. I would get in the lift and people would say 'Oh g'day, Alan, where you have been? You been for a run or are you going for a run?'"

Carole decided the whole family would support Alan wherever he went to run.

"I figure that part of making a marriage work is sharing each other's interests. If I stayed at home, we'd probably drift apart," Carole says.

During the 1980's the family spent almost every weekend traveling to a run.

"I used to say to Carole, 'Would you like to go away for a weekend?' And she'd say 'yeah, yeah, where is the run at?' 'Well, there is a run at Mudgee, or there is a run at Lithgow,'" Alan says.

Fun runs became a large part of the family's social life. "We went away a lot and we made a lot of friends out of it," Carole says. "It just became a sociable day out with picnics, so the kids had pretty healthy outings and weekends."

Those runs included 13 marathons. Alan ran the first one in 3.00.15 and finished the others in less than 3 hours. His fastest time was 2.50.

Alan also gradually changed his mental approach to the sport. "When I first started running, I used to just switch off. Then I realised that you really have to concentrate while you are running. You can drop places or anything can happen while you are thinking about something else."

His training schedule currently includes four runs and three deep-water running sessions a week.

Carole is a keen walker - and organiser. After the Gold Coast Runners Club, which Alan joined upon their move to Queensland, moved to Burleigh Waters, the couple set up a new one.

"We thought there was a need for a club at the northern end of Broadwater," Alan says.

Carole is now president and secretary of the two-year old Southport Runners and Walkers Club (<http://sraws.tripod.com>) while Alan is the club's captain. There are 150 members, and a third of them turned out for the club's most recent run, Alan says. The club had at least 20 members at this year's City to Surf.

"Some people used to say to me 'oh, it is alright for you - you get a preferred start!' I used to say I get the preferred start not because my name is Alan Farrell, I have to bloody earn it. But now I do get the preferred start because my name is Alan Farrell." ☺