



Nowra Athletics Club had its beginnings in the 1950s - an era when athletics as a sport was on a high in Australia following the great success of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games. Running guru Frank McCaffrey founded the Nowra club, and his enthusiasm for everything "athletics" in that golden era of the late 50s established solid roots for Nowra Athletics Club - roots which have stood the test of time for almost 50 years now.

TRACK and field competition with a particular emphasis on sprinting was the main direction of the club back then, and several "open meets" were conducted on a grass track at the Nowra Showground in those formative years. As was (and still is) common in many country towns, the local showground was used for many sports (in Nowra's case, rugby league and cricket) and athletics was often considered the "poorer cousin" when it came to the sharing of these facilities. It says much of the ability of the athletes and the dedication of the officials involved to be able to perform and cope in this environment with the success that they did.

It is amazing that the Nowra Athletics Club's two "greatest-ever" runners, Olympian sprinter Paul Greene and dual national 800m champion Alan Ozolins, commenced their outstanding

If you've never had the pleasure of running at "Willandra", make it a must on your calendar for 2007. You'll enjoy it - one of life's ultimate running experiences.

by KEVYN DAVIS, Club President



Nowra AC Junior Alex Pitkethly leads Senior Damian Smith with 400m to go.

athletics careers on what was virtually a second-rate grass track. The Nowra Athletics Club was immensely proud of the achievements of these two champions who attained the highest of success from such humble beginnings; both of these champions to this day continue to be highly revered by the local running community.

In the early 1960s, Frank McCaffrey relocated to Sydney where he continued his interest in athletics, becoming involved in Western Suburbs Athletics Club.

The reins at Nowra were now taken over by a younger, but no less enthusiastic, athletics mentor - a man by the name of Rod Gibb. Unknowingly at the time, this "changing of the guard" was to have an enormous far-reaching effect on the Nowra Athletics Club, one that would virtually steer the

club to its eventual destiny as one of the "strengths" within the NSW country athletics scenes. Rod Gibb was an experienced Sydney club sprinter when he moved to Nowra in the early 60s, it was Sydney's loss and Nowra's gain. Rod met and married local girl Jan Wilson, and they subsequently built a home on the Wilson farm at Cambewarra at the foot of Browns Mountain. Although unknown at the time, thus was set in place the future of Nowra Athletics Club.

With an annual summer season of track and field competition now firmly established, Rod, as club Secretary, decided to instigate a cross country competition for local runners, and where else but at his parents-in-law's property at Cambewarra. The autumn of 1969 saw the first few runs taking place with 5km becoming the accepted distance.



And they're off in the end-of-winter-season club run at Willandra.



(R-L) Danika Heron, Paige Connolly-Davies, Yolanda Van Arkel, Emily Warden, and Zac Jones speed past the dam in the U12 race.

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totalled only 15-18 runners, and that was on a good day when 10 or so cadets from the nearby Naval College at Jervis Bay came along to bolster the field. The club was indebted to the Naval College in more ways than one for many years, as Nowra runners were often invited to compete on the delightful cross country course at HMAS Creswell, as the Naval College was called. This became a regular occurrence and did much to stimulate the growth of Nowra Athletics Club as the course at Creswell located on the foreshores of beautiful Jervis Bay was a runner's paradise: glistening white sandy beaches lapped by sparkling crystal clear waters; delightful soft forest trails where the only distraction was the chorus of myriads of rosellas and parrots in the treetops; and the inquisitive stare of hundreds of kangaroos as they grazed contentedly with their young joeys, seemingly unconcerned by all the huffing and puffing of runners staggering through their midst. And so the Nowra club now had two magical cross country courses at its disposal

cautious route rather than being point to point à la City to Surf style. It is interesting to note that many fun runs subsequently followed this



Youth vs. experience as Jake Ring and Paul Jennings battle for first place in a club handicap race at Tomerong. Tammy Jones hangs on for third as evidence of the handicapper's good work follows close behind.

example which offered greater administration efficiency, better spectator appeal and the advantage for runners of hav-



Emily Warden, Tarlou Smith and Yasmin Smith head up the final hill in the U12 race.

ing their "gear and clothing" already there at the finish.

That first Circular Seven in 1975 attracted approximately 350 starters, most of whom were just ordinary John Citizens. A local business person was overheard to comment enthusiastically after the race, "Isn't it great to see all these people out having a go? A few years back you would have been laughed at if you suggested there would be hundreds of people prepared to run a distance road race in Nowra. I'll have to run next year - it looks like a great challenge." That man did run the race the next year, but sadly soon after developed cancer and died before he could fulfil his dream to become a regular runner.

Nowra Athletics Club continued to grow and under the leadership of Rod Gibb (who ironically was a sprinter in his day - not a distance runner) staged a number of NSW road championships in the ensuing years. The annual NSW Road Relays were held at Nowra on several occasions, and mar-

athon running was introduced to the town when it hosted the 1978 and 1979 NSW Marathon Championships. The Circular Seven Fun Run continued for another 20 years or so before traffic and administration problems finally caused its demise.

In 1976, however, in the midst of the running boom another local long distance road race, the 32km Shoalhaven "King of the Mountain", was resurrected - again by Rod Gibb and his family. Originally staged as a "one-off" event back in 1966 when Commonwealth Games marathon champion Dave Power won the King of the Mountain - a testing hilly race from Nowra to Kangaroo Valley - it has been successfully conducted for the past 31 years and is now one of the longest established road races in Australia.



// ...membership of Nowra Athletics Club swelled to the point that the club actually became the largest athletics club in Australia. Its success was not based on gold medal-winning performances ... rather its appeal was as a family club. //



Club President Kevyn Davis emerges from the forest and heads for the finish with Graeme Pepper in pursuit.



Club Patron, Rod Gibb, with (L-R) Lucinda Chapman, Eliza Stewart and Jenny Dallaway, medalists in the Open race.



Club President Kevyn Davis and Secretary Jan Gibb prepare to hand out certificates for the 2006 winter season to the assembled club members.



Jake Ring nears the end of the first lap in the U18 race with the majestic mountain escarpment in the background.

country. The Club also hosted the Australian Cross Country Championships in 1992, 1994 and 2002.

We're not sure if it's the challenge of those heartbreak hills, the stunning mountain vista or the good old country homemade pumpkin soup and BBQ available from the canteen which brings the visitors back year after year. But whatever it is, for Nowra Athletics Club it is the highlight of our year and we look forward to staging it every year. The excitement, the colour, the atmosphere, the pained but satisfied look on the faces of the runners at the finish – it is simply great to see so many visiting runners enjoying their day out in the country. Nowra Athletics Club takes much satisfaction in being able to provide this opportunity for others to experience what we consider one of the ultimates in our sport of running – conquering the “back hill” at “Willandra”.

In recent years post-2000 Olympics, our club has suffered a downturn in regular competitors, but some of our long-term members feel this is not entirely a step backwards, as the 150-odd runners now attending means easier administration and, in some ways, greater social atmosphere. To this end the club has introduced an end-of-season 2 day non-competitive relay run. Initially conducted from Canberra to Nowra, the relay was altered a couple of years ago and is now run from Narooma to Milton along forest trails and farm back roads. To maintain year-round contact with its distance runners, three years ago the club instigated an evening summer road running competition of

5km to 10km distance with an emphasis on social camaraderie. This is proving popular, although some members find work commitments coupled with the summer heat too much of a restriction, and numbers regularly participating in this competition remain at a fairly steady 30-40. However,

the core runners who do attend thoroughly enjoy the “come and have a run” atmosphere and the “pick the winner” competition adds spice to the weekly get together. Mind you, the prizes of chocolate bars could well be the main reason most show up.

This year the club is also introducing a number of social events as “special” days or evenings - all with a running theme but at the same time encouraging participation as a family. Whilst Nowra Athletics Club is now not the largest club in NSW and may not necessarily win as many championship medals as some clubs, it remains extremely successful as a “family club”. Whether it is track and field, cross country or road running, Nowra Athletics Club will have runners of all ages competing together as families. It appears that Nowra Athletics Club has found the right balance – running, individual effort, and team recognition. ☺

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(R-L) Harry Scouller and Hayden Miller with the leaders in the U14 3K.

up to an almost uncontrollable 300 to 400 runners. The weekly program had to be altered to cope with these numbers with four different distances now on offer each week. Handicap races of 2km, 3km, 5km and 10km saw many parents standing up on the podium alongside their children at season's end collecting their hard-earned trophies. The club was now using three courses for its winter cross country competition: Cambewarra (or Willandra as it is now called), Tomerong (the bushland property of Ron and Ruth McKinnon – Ron in later years was to star as the bullock owner and driver in the ABC Television Series “Outback House”) and Longreach, a forest trail course 8km

west of Nowra.

“Willandra” at Cambewarra had been extensively improved and developed by the Gibb family, together with a small band of Nowra Athletics Club personnel, to become a demanding but top-class cross country course. In 1990 the Club hosted its first State championship, the Open 8km for men and 6km for women together with the Little Athletics State Championship. The club later successfully applied for the NSW 12km Cross Country Championships, and so the annual “Willandra Country Classic” day was born. Every year for the past 12 years hundreds of Sydney athletes (plus many from Wollongong, Canberra and numerous other athletics clubs) have travelled to “Willandra” for their annual dose of “real” cross