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## VALE - Reg Austin

Australian athletics lost one of its greatest athletes with the death of Reg Austin, aged 78, on June 30.

Born on October 16, 1936, Reg won professional races across Australia, claimed 15 world masters titles, set seven world records and trained one of the fastest ever rugby league players, Ken Irvine. He was also at the forefront of major changes to the amateur rules in Australian and world track and field.

He played rugby league in his early '20s in Wollongong, before moving to Sydney to play with North Sydney in 1958-1961. In 1961, aged 24, he continued his football career at Cootamundra where he played fullback for eight years. "I started running when I went to Cootamundra purely to keep fit for football," Austin said in an interview with **Mike Agostini** in 1977. "There were no amateur clubs in the area but there were some fellows running around in \$10 handicaps in the bush, so I started doing that."

This was an era of popular professional handicapped races across Australia and Austin ran at many carnivals. The carnival at which he enjoyed most success was the Latrobe Gift in northern Tasmania. Held between Christmas and New Year, he made the gift final on eight occasions winning four races in 1965, 1966, 1969 and 1973. Also in Tasmania, he placed second in the Burnie Gift on three occasions. In 1970 he was the backmarker in the Stawell Gift final and finished fifth running off 7m.

Reg was very quick. He clocked times of 100m 10.4 (1969), 200m 20.6 (1975) and 400m 47.3 (1969). Controversially unable to compete in amateur athletics in his '20s and early '30s, masters athletics gave him the opportunity to run against the best in the world for his age.

The inaugural World Masters Track and Field Championships were held in 1975 in Toronto Canada. Now 38 years old, he competed at the top of the 30-39 year age group, considered a significant disadvantage. But not for Austin who won the 200m in a stunning 22.1 (0.5m/s) beating American Paton (22.5).

The next championships were held in Stockholm Sweden in 1977. Being "known professional athletes" there was drama about the participation of Austin and another masters athlete Queenslander **Bernie Hogan**. Eventually they competed, but for the USA. Austin was possibly in his best form ever, winning the 100m in 10.8 and 200m by a full second in a world record 21.9.

"All I want to do is run and be with the boys," said Austin who was then 40 years old and not likely to impact on the amateurs.

In 1948 there had been controversy around decathlete **Peter Mullins** competing in the London Olympics. He was a physical education teacher and it was considered he earned money from sport. Fortunately he was cleared to compete. At the 1977 KB Games Reg Austin relayed a conversation with a world leading 'amateur' athlete who in one race earned more than Austin did in an entire year. During this time Austin won prizemoney of about \$2000 a year while his expenses were four times that. In 1984, after years of urging by key figures like Austin, Australian Athletics finally became 'open' allowing professional and amateurs to move freely between events. It paved the way for many professionals to join the amateur ranks and represent Australia, including **Chris Perry** and **John Dinan**.

Austin went on to become one of the greatest masters athletes in history. At the 1997 World Masters Championships, now aged 60, continued to win titles at a record 12th consecutive World Championships. After winning silver in the 100m and bronze in the 200m, he anchored the 4x400m relay to gold. It maintained a unique record of gold at every world championships, the only athlete to achieve this. But in 1999 the record was broken as he won bronze medals in the sprints and the relays and didn't place. He continued to compete and at the 2001 World Championships in Brisbane, he was one of only a handful of athletes to have competed at all 14 championships.

During an amazing career Austin set seven world records and won 15 world titles. In 2010 he was inducted into the Australian Masters Association hall of fame.

The master coach behind Austin, was **Jack Giddy** and for decades they trained at Mackay Oval in Centennial Park. Austin also contributed to assist in the administration of the sport. He was president of the NSW and Australian professional running associations and for years financed **Harry Stanley** who administered the NSW Professional Running League.

He never moved far from football as a sprint coach/trainer with both the North Sydney Bears and Many Warringah Rugby Leagues teams for decades. While at North Sydney he coached Ken Irvine, considered one of the fastest ever league players ever.

His close friend **Peter Crombie**, himself a world champion masters sprinter, detailed Austin's last few years.

"I have been visiting Reg in his nursing home for some years now, and Magosia (Peter's partner), and I would take him out for a coffee and morning tea which he used to love. In the early days, some years ago, Reg had had a few falls including down the stairs at home, presumably arising from small strokes. It was then decided it was safer for him in a nursing home where he could receive proper care. At the time, his speech was slurred and he could do no more than shuffle with a walking frame. He could not even hold a coffee cup, which would spill all over him when he tried to lift it.

"In the beginning, Reg was unable to leave his room but started doing his strength exercises and was ultimately able to shuffle out of the home with me with his frame and we would take him out.

"His speech was still poor and it was difficult to understand his mumble but this gradually improved. Over a period of time, we took him out for more and more morning teas along the waterfront at Manly, which he said was the highlight of his week.

"Over a period, Reg dispensed with his walking frame and gravitated to a walking stick and then to carrying the stick although his walk was still a little slow. At no time during the whole episode did Reg ever have trouble relating his many stories or being up with the latest football scores or being able to carry out a normal conversation.

"We took him out to the recent NSW State Titles and the Nationals, which were in Sydney and he was in good spirits, just loving the outing. I took him to training a few times and even to our squad race night, which he particularly loved as squad members came up to him to chat.

"None of these people had ever met him before except for his incredible records but treated him with great reverence when hearing of his many track exploits in masters sprinting and professional handicap running where he was also a superstar in his younger days.

"Reg used to walk down to the local gym at Manly nearly every day and do an exercise workout and either walk or catch the bus back. He was tireless in his attempts to get stronger and was achieving some success.

"Just before he died, I had arranged again to bring Reg to a weekend training session in the winter sun, and he was quite excited. I rang to give him pickup details and he advised that he was in hospital for a gall bladder operation. He had apparently passed some kidney stones.

"Despite the fact that they had seemed to disappear and after tests at the hospital it was decided to still proceed with his operation. He had to be under scrutiny as he was taken off his blood thinners leading in to the operation.

"He had walked down to the hospital coffee shop to buy himself a coffee where he was found on the ground where he collapsed, presumably from a stroke. He had hit his head in the fall and blood apparently pooled in his head.

"He was in a coma for some days from which he gradually started to improve, although only marginally to the extent where he could briefly open his eyes and even say a word or two. The doctors advised the family that he would never ever improve from his current state and were surprised at how long he had lasted.

"They advised that all life-support systems be turned off, and four days later Reg died on Tuesday 30 June.

Peter Crombie admired Reg Austin enormously.

"I sought Reg out as a mentor some 30 years ago and ran with him in his squad as a workhorse for him for some years despite me being some seven years younger. He was always helpful and a hard-working trainer who would

always turn up. I later left his squad to start up my own and was able to carry with me his fierce determination to succeed.”

Crombie summed him up:

“Reg was a class guy and an incredible competitor.”

### **Reg Austin Statistics**

An example of the fast times he recorded at different ages, many of these times were world records.

100m-11.24 at 51, 11.78 at 57

200m 21.9 at 41, 22.40 at 46 and 22.88 at 52

400m- 50.61 at 47and 51.81 at 51

*David Tarbotton and Ron Bendall for Athletics NSW*

*Image: Left to right - Peter Crombie, Reg Austin & Jim Smith (image courtesy of Peter Crombie)*