

## WE HAVE LOST ONE OF OUR GREATS – JUST SHY OF A CENTURY

By Bryan Thomas – ACT Masters Athletics

Although just short of his 100th birthday John Gilmour OAM, legendary WA athlete and one of our inaugural AMA Hall of Fame inductees died Wednesday 1 August 2018.

I had long been an admirer of John Gilmour and had met him on several occasions usually at national or international championships where he was always one of the star performers while I was a much younger middle-of-the field “trier”.

I met up with John at both the 2016 World Championships in Perth and at the recent AMA Championships also in Perth. As an ambassador of the WMA Championships John was always available to chat with anyone interested in him or athletics in general as well as being kept busy as a medal presenter. Who will forget the standing ovation 97 year-old John received as he jogged down the final straight in each of his 800 and 1500m events? My next meeting with John was during the 2018 AMA Championships where I thought he looked and sounded more spritely and healthier than he had two years earlier. Although now just short of his 99th birthday John was in attendance every day sitting at a table near the athlete's entry onto the track promoting his two books – *All in My Stride, John Gilmour's Story: Changi to World Champion* by Richard Harris (pub. 1999) and *Lasting the Distance, Memoirs of John Gilmour – World Champion Runner* by P.D. Collier (pub.2010). But John was more interested in chatting with athletes and spectators and when called upon to present medals at the podium many of the winners were keen to include one of our sports all-time greatest athletes in their commemorative photographs.

John was perhaps one of the most successful Australian athletes of all time. If it had not been for WWII when he was interned for three and a half years as a POW in Changi and then as a slave in Japan from which he returned suffering malnourishment and almost blind he would most likely have represented Australia at an Empire and/or Olympic Games.

He certainly is the most prolific and successful Australian male Veteran / Masters Athlete in the history of our sport. John set twenty-nine World Records in middle and long distance races and even many more national, championship and state records. At the time of his death he still held four World Records – the M60, M65 and M70 for the one hour run and the M70 half marathon and also held seventeen Australian Records ranging from the M55 to M70 age groups for the 1500m, mile, 3000m, 5000m, 10000m and one hour run on the track as well as for the half marathon and marathon.

However, apart from his outstanding running achievements John will also be remembered for his contributions to the evolution of Veteran / Masters Athletics as an administrator, coach and inspirational mentor to junior, senior and veteran athletes. In 1950 John founded the Canning District AAC and twenty-four years later was one of founding members (the others being Cliff Bould, David Carr, Jack Collins, Dick Horsley, Keith MacDonald and Jim Smith) of the veterans' athletics club in Western Australia (WAVAAC) in which he served six terms on committee. Many years later the club changed its name to Masters Athletics WA (MAWA) and in 2009 John became its patron. Because of his outstanding contributions to athletics John was honoured with Life Memberships of the Canning District Athletics Club, Western Australia AA, WA Marathon Club and of course MAWA. He was also patron of the 'WA Lest We Forget Run' conducted annually by Athletics WA on behalf of Athletics Australia while the annual Athletics WA State 10 000m Championships is named in his honour. In 1975 John was bestowed with an OAM by Prince Charles and a few months later announced as WA Sportsman of the Year where the citation stated: "*The lifetime commitment to athletics by John Gilmour, and his involvement in administration and coaching, makes him an extraordinary example to other sportsman and illustrates a dedication found in few people.*" Such words of praise about John could be repeated for all of the many awards he had won throughout his long and brilliant athletics career. In 1987 he was the 'WA Visually Impaired and Community Newspapers Sportsman of the Year' as well as being presented with an 'Advance Australia Award' by the WA Governor.

John was very involved in the early years of veteran athletics and therefore was part of establishing the sport within Australia and even internationally. In 1969 he accompanied Cliff Bould and Col Junner to the USA Masters Championships in San Diego, California where all three were successful. Three years later John linked up with a select Australian contingent organized by Jack Pennington and Wal Sheppard, incidentally also members of our Hall of Fame, for an historic tour of Europe. The team was to participate in the first international track and field championships for veteran athletes (men over 40) at Crystal Palace in London and Cologne in Germany to coincide with the 1972 Munich Olympic Games. Following the Games forty-eight Australians participated in the International Athletics Championships for men over 40 years-of-age conducted in Cologne. The championships were a far cry from what they have since become. Competition was conducted in four 10 year age-groups for men M40-49, M50-59, M60-69 and M70+. Despite wet and cold conditions and competing under floodlights on a cinders track the Australians performed well, winning five gold, seven silver and two bronze medals across a variety of disciplines. John won the M50-59 5000m. According to Jack Pennington: "It was a tour never to be forgotten and the championships in Cologne were reported as being the World

Championship in the *New York Times*, the *London Guardian*, several German newspapers and even in the *Canberra Times*". *Veteris*, the magazine of the Association of Veteran Athletics (UK), also reported favourably on the historically significant events that had occurred in Europe during the late summer of 1972. "When US and Canadian Masters, and Australian Vets visited Europe in 1972 the move towards competition for men over 40 really took off."

The inaugural Australian Veterans' Championships was held over a weekend in December 1973 at Box Hill in Melbourne. A large team of USA Masters participated alongside athletes mainly from Victoria and NSW but several were from both South and Western Australia. John was one of the stars of these championships for men over 40 years-of-age conducted in ten year age-groups when he romped home for an easy win in the 50-59 5000m in 16:22. John would go onto being successful in another eighteen annual national championships where he set numerous Championship and Australian Records and was acknowledged as 'athlete of the meet' on several occasions.

The first World Veterans' Track and Field Championships held in Toronto, Canada in August 1975 was a great success. There were more than 1400 competitors, including 80 women, from 27 countries. The Australian team was very successful, winning 16 gold, 12 silver and 12 bronze medals. Four Aussies were multi-gold medalists - among them was M55 John who won both the 3000 and 5000m. John went onto run at another ten World Championships never coming home without a couple of medals, most of course were gold.

By participating in the 1993 World Championships in Miyazaki, Japan John was one of only twenty competitors, of which three were Aussies (M55 NSW sprinter Reg Austin, John and Victorian middle distance runner M75 Jack Stevens) had competed at all ten World Championships. John was apprehensive about entering for these championships considering his war-time experiences at the hands of the Japanese. Nevertheless, he had a memorable meet; winning the M70 10km cross-country on a hilly course that was especially difficult for John to navigate because of his limited eyesight, he also won the 10 000m and was third in both the 5000 and 1500m and to wind up his Miyazaki experience he was invited to be a member of the Australian M65 4x400m relay team that finished sixth. Apart from his guest appearances in the 2016 WMA Championships in Perth John's final international race was at the 1997 World championships in Durban, RSA where he finished second in the M75 10km cross-country.

We have lost one of our greatest. Thanks for the memories John. A quote by Herb Elliot (Olympic gold medalist and multi sub four minute miler who retired undefeated) in the *Foreword* of Richard Harris's book *All in My Stride* concludes this summary of John Gilmour - champion athlete and good bloke. "...people like John make me determined that I will not consider to be old. His inspiration wants me to look forward to all of the possibilities that are ahead. John Gilmour is an ideal role model..."

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