

Skating – The Early Days:

In 1946 just after the end of World War II, St. Moritz Ice Skating Palais on the Upper Esplanade at St. Kilda was the gathering place for lots of Dutch migrants who congregated in huge crowds in the corners of the rink. This was the time my brother Len Duke & I took up skating on Saturday mornings – he was 13, I was 11. While we were learning it was bad enough trying to get across the 3ft. openings in the wall around the rink without having to negotiate these crowds, so we grabbed hold of anything that was handy – jumpers, arms, whatever. Sometime when we fell down we pulled a few over on top of us. This really hurried up the process of learning to skate.

We hired figure skates with horrible black boots & tried to get the same ones each time. If you were late getting into the rink you'd end up with a shocking pair of boots which hurt your feet for the whole session. Eventually we graduated to our own boots and skates – Len bought “tubes” as he was interested in Ice Hockey and we were both keen on the Fast Skate which was held at the end of the dance sessions. When it came time to get my own blades Mum took me into Jack Maloney's in the city to be fitted with figure skates but I decided on tubes like Len's. Because of this, one night when I was at the rink to watch the races I was asked to compete in the Ladies' Victorian Championships “to make up the numbers.” They obviously didn't have enough starters to make it a race, and it being my first time in a race of course I fell over, but it sparked my interest! I remember Betty Amess being in the race, and she eventually went on to win several Victorian and Australian titles over the years.

We spent a lot of time at the rink and eventually got a Season's Ticket which meant you could go anytime, so it was usually 3 or 4 times a week. When each ice-skating session finished a tractor was brought onto the ice & boys lined up to grab a broom & sweep the ice behind the tractor because they got a free pass to skating next time. Len was one of the more senior boys who picked out those to do the sweeping & our cousin and his friend Lindsay Fox would follow him around saying "Please can I have a go Len, pick me please!" Later Lindsay became fabulously rich & now owns a huge fleet of transport vehicles. Often on the road we'll see the sign on the back of a truck reading "You are now passing another Fox."

When he was 15 Len & his long time friend from school, David Morgan, were foundation members of the first post-war speed skating club in Victoria called the Melbourne Amateur Speed Skating Club with colours of Maroon & Gold. The pocket was the outline of a yellow shield on the maroon background, with a speed skate and a flash of lightning in the middle! Len wrote the first Constitution of the Club & as I had just learned to type, did the first draft for him. His room was set up like an office & he must've been the only teenager at the time to have a filing cabinet in his bedroom and a lock on the door! These were days when our mothers made our beds and cleaned up after us, and Mum had strict instructions not to disturb anything as he knew exactly where everything was. He said if one piece of paper got mixed up with another it would ruin everything!

I was 14 when girls were admitted to Melb. Amateurs & made sure I was among the first to join. Later several other clubs were formed – the Southern Flyers (Two Blues), Jaguars (Gold & Black), & Racers (Red). Girls then had their own Club – Twin Wings (Black & White), but later it was abandoned and they were admitted to the boys' clubs. We practiced racing and starts on Sunday mornings at St. Moritz and sometimes the Glacierium, the rink by the banks of the Yarra River in Melbourne in the area where South Bank now stands.

At St. Moritz, general skating sessions were accompanied by a live band sitting in an overhead alcove. During the dance session a spotlight was trained onto a mirror-covered ball which revolved & sprinkled the ice with dancing lights. After the dancing we waited eagerly for the time when we could put on our speeds which were about 15" long, and compete in the 'fast skate'. The blocks were laid out on the track then first came the Ladies' - sometimes to "The Flight of the Bumble Bee"- then the Men's, & the thrilling sounds of "Zardis". I later found out these were classical pieces, but they really got the arms swinging & legs pounding round the track.

Ice Hockey was very popular with the boys, and we enjoyed competing in races held during interval in the games. Several clubs from both St. Moritz and the Glacierium competed each Friday night at the rink – Pirates, Demons, Monarchs, Golden Bears, Black Hawks, Red Arrows and Raiders. Len joined the Monarchs, & we'd all crowd down on Friday nights to watch the boys we knew from Saturday session's play. Once an ice-hockey match was organized against the girls & I was surprised at how fast everything happened around me & glad when the game finished. Now I believe they have a girl's competition!

Eventually Len gave up Hockey to concentrate on speed skating. His Championships included:

1948 Victorian Junior ¼ mile
Victorian Junior ½ mile
Australian Junior ¼ mile
1949 Victorian Junior ¼ mile
1951 Victorian Senior ½ Mile
Australian Senior ¼ mile
Australian Senior ½ mile
Australian Senior 1 mile

We went on several trips together as Victorian Speed Skating team reps, first to Sydney in 1951 when he was 17 & I was 15. We all travelled up & back by train sitting up overnight. One smaller boy thought he'd make himself more comfortable by stretching out in the luggage rack to get a bit of sleep. That week Len won a Junior Australian ¼ Mile Championship & 3 Senior Australian Championships – ¼ mile, ½ mile & 1 mile – setting new Australian Records for all 3, & he was still only a Junior.

On our return to Melbourne photographers from “The Sun” took a picture of the team arriving at Spencer Street Station with our bag of trophies, and we were pleased as Punch to see it appear in the paper next day.

In 1951 I won Victorian ¼ & ½ Mile Championships & that year our interstate trip to Hobart for the Australian Championships was much more comfortable – we flew with Australian Airlines, and proudly posed for a photo in our Victorian Blazers on the steps of the plane. The rink at Moonah in Hobart was open air, which added to the excitement as it felt more like a natural lake. There I was lucky enough to win the ½ mile Australian Championship setting a new Australian record at 1.45.4. Slow by today's standards. These records, along with those of many other skaters, are in the **Ampol Book of Australian Sporting Records (1952-1987)**. Earlier records are in the previous edition. A short time after the Titles the Rink at Hobart was burned out twice, and I don't think it ever became an ice rink again, although it was said to be the best in the Southern Hemisphere.

One of the boys Colin Hickey broke the 3 minute mile on ice & was featured in a **Newsreel at the Hour Show Theatre in Melbourne**. It was most unusual for just anyone to get their name in the paper or be on the news, so our crowd gathered at the theatre & stayed on to watch it a several times.

Colin later went overseas to race in Norway & we were overawed by this huge event.

Len was unable to race for some time after being hit by a car in a serious bike accident. For 6 months he was encased in plaster from neck to waist.

1950: Foundation member of Jaguar Speed Skating Club, also Hon. Sec. J.S.S.

1951: Honorary Secretary, Cpt-Coach Jaguar Speed Skating Club
Honorary Secretary of Victorian Speed Skating Union
Won Victorian Senior ½ mile Championship
Won Australian Senior ¼, ½ & 1 mile Championships – broke all Aust. Records.
Won “Rushall Trophy”- “For being Victoria’s best skater over all distances”.

1952: President Southern Flyers Speed Skating Club
Honorary Secretary of Victorian Speed Skating Union
Chief Starter of V.S.S.U

1953: President of Southern Flyers Speed Skating Club
Honorary Secretary of V.S.S.U. & Chief Judge
Honorary Secretary-Treasurer of Australian Amateur Ice Racing Council
Delegate to Victorian Olympic Council

1954: Vice-President of Victorian Speed Skating Union
Racing Secretary of V.S.S.U
President of Southern Flyers Speed Skating Club
Honorary Secretary-Treasurer of Australian Amateur Ice Racing Council
Delegate to Victorian Olympic Council

Member of Victorian Teams 1948/50/51

However he retained his interest in skating, even after giving up racing, and was on several committees related to the sport. He took meticulous notes on all the races between 1950 and 1953 and a hand-written notebook listing all place getters and times is still in existence. (Copy attached)

Other speed skaters I remember from that time were Alec Figgins, David Pugh, Noel Wilson, Eddie Spicer, Colin Cusden, Allan Heffernan, Wally Truscott, Graham Quint, Les Griffiths, Jim McCutcheon, Stan White, Betty Amess, Val Roberts, Mairi Connell, Gerry Leonard, and Teddi Higgs, who as Teddi Jenkins went on to win many Ladies titles and set new records.

Sometimes during Ice Carnivals and Shows they put on Speed Skating Exhibitions and barrel jumping to amuse the audience. Len loved doing this and to practice at home he'd put our dining room table with the sides folded down, across the end of our long passage, call out "Track" to warn anyone coming out of another room, race down & leap over the table, landing in the kitchen.

St. Moritz was eventually pulled down along with the Palais de Danse next door, and a large hotel complex now stands on the site. They have allocated a corner of one of the foyers to St. Moritz with a few pictures on the walls of skating in the early days.

In 1953 Len donated the Duke Perpetual Trophy for an annual Interstate Speed Skating competition. **The 50th Anniversary of the event was celebrated, in August 2003 at the Acacia Ridge Ice Rink in Brisbane, and I was privileged to be there and very proud to present the trophy to the Captain of the winning Queensland team. Len's eldest daughter Verlie also presented the Best & Fairest Award,** which had been made out of one of his Australian Championship trophies.

As a young man Len was interested in joining the Police Force but at 5'10" he was under the regulation height of 6 ft. Later in his 40s he was able to become a member of the Commonwealth Police Force due to a reduction in the height requirement. Unfortunately in 1982 he was struck down with a brain tumour at 49 & died 6 months later.

His wife returned his trophies to the Victorian Speed Skating Union, one of which was made into the Best & Fairest trophy for the Duke Trophy competition, so his name lives on in the skating world. Although those who race for the trophy today may not know who he was, some who skated with us are still connected to the sport and would remember him. He would be very proud to see the standard of racing today, and to know that with the young skaters coming along, the future of the sport is in good hands.

Lillian Dillon
Queensland, 2003