

CAIRNS ROAD RUNNERS AND TRIATHLON CLUB IS 30 THIS YEAR 1979 – 2009

30 years! It seems like yesterday! Thinking back you can't escape John Covacevich, the founder of the club and the most charismatic and inspirational character I have met! Back then he was a successful solicitor going to seed. The mid riff tyre was expanding and the bum bone, which we know grows horizontally, was totally displacing and overrunning the sides of his chair. Most people would join a gym. But John, always one for the grand gesture, founded a running club. He became known as "The General" and ran things in a very efficient and dictatorial manner. The club filled a need. There were all these young parents bored out of their minds with domesticity who wanted a way out. The club became a social institution. There were the Wednesday runs and on Thursday they would burn up the Gorge. Regular races were scheduled. Club members decamped at Davies Creek and Tinaroo Dam, where they raced, ran, swam, barbecued, read back numbers of Runner's World and, if I remember rightly, drank champagne from hollow stemmed glasses.

John's second achievement was to pioneer the sport of triathlon in Cairns. There was a degree of self-interest in this. He was a great swimmer and he figured that with some training on the bike he might be able to win a few races instead of coming second to Bell, Morrissey and McGoldrick. So in 1981 he organized the Coral Coast Triathlon. Looking back it is hard to imagine how huge and important this race was. It brought all the aerobic sporting organizations together – the bike club, the swim clubs, the surf club and the running clubs. Schools too were invited and helped with the organization. And John nearly pulled it off – he finished second behind Australian champion Greg Reddan in that very first race.

The Coral Coast triathlon has been through some rough periods, but today it is established in the Cairns sporting calendar. I am sure if John were organizing it he would tie it up with tourism so as to attract competitors from Indonesia, Malaysia and other South East countries. This, I think, is its future. The race has played a role in the development of two world-class athletes. Brad Bevan ran in the first Coral Coast (I know because I beat him) since then he has won it several times and went on to become World Triathlon Champion. People forget that Leanda Cave, who won the 2002 World Triathlon Championship in Cancun Mexico gained valuable experience racing in the Coral Coast and in the road races put on by the Roadies. I should also mention Mo Macintosh who won the open female Coral Coast when she was well into her 50's. She also won World Master' competitions in Triathlon. Cairns Road Runners and Triathlon Club and the Coral Coast are two of John's greatest legacies.

My involvement with the club revolved around David Todd. David was a very promising and popular athlete who competed in those early days. He finished 3rd in Queensland 1,500 metres title. When he scored his first job he immediately bought a Col Nago bicycle so he could compete in Triathlons. I recall early morning rides with him up to Port Douglas. Then tragically he was killed in a road accident on the Bruce Highway. It was John's suggestion to commemorate his memory by establishing a bursary fund to recognize and help defray the costs of young Cairns athletes who made it into the Queensland Cross Country and Track teams. The initial money contributed to the fund has long been exhausted but thanks to the club and the generous contributions from Rosie's Run the scheme still operates. Nearly every athlete who has made the state team in cross country or the distance track team since 1986 has benefited from the scheme. Also in his memory is the David Todd Cross Country Mile which has been held at Centenary Lakes for the past 23 years. Traditionally it is used as "the last hit out" before the Peninsula Cross Country team leaves for the Queensland titles.

A most important institution in the club's development, if not the most important, was the de Kievith family. Marcel migrated to Australia with his family in 1984. For years he was a dominant force running 32 minutes for 10 km. He has won the 10 km series in the open division, the veteran division and in the masters division and also the Veteran Title for the Coral Coast Triathlon. His wife Theresia is also a runner of note. For many years his family were the administrative backbone of the club. He attended the meetings, set up and organized the races with his family attending to registration. He would then compete in the race, mostly winning his division and then pack everything up. Age has wearied him but he can still run at a respectable clip for a 60 year old and is unbeatable in his class. The worst thing to happen to the club was "The Great Schism of 1994". A new club devoted to the sport of triathlon broke away to form the Cairns Crocs. There was a lot of acrimony and animosity associated with the split and I have always felt that things would have been better had it never occurred. However, since then passions have cooled. Today the vibe between the clubs is good and there is a great deal of cooperation. This is evidenced by the fact that the club publishes a calendar which features events put on by the running club, the triathlon club and the rogaie club.

In thirty years the club has weathered some storms and there have been low points. But today it is financially strong, this is in no small part due to the astute management of Rob McKenzie, its President. The Wednesday runs, which over the years have set out from a variety of venues, continue. Recently, due to the enthusiasm of Lorraine Lawson, the Wednesday run format has been reorganized and revived. The runs now start on the Esplanade and there is the option of participating in a handicap run followed by a barbecue. The club will continue to organize races of quality and variety in the future. It will continue to create competitive opportunities for athletes in Cairns, particularly the young ones, to strut their stuff. But in the end the future of our club is in the hands of its membership. It will be up to us, up to our enthusiasm, up to our imagination and the sacrifice of the volunteers. Long live the Cairns Road Runners and Triathlon Club!

By Kev Morrissey