

Syliva at home on

I first noticed Sylvia Byers' vibrant smile as she participated in a track Walk event. At first glance, I thought maybe she was grimacing, but no, it was a happy grin. Knowing Sylvia as I do now I understand that her megawatt smile expresses the joy, enthusiasm and confidence with which she approaches race walking and pretty much everything in life.

Born in Goomalling in 1934, Sylvia's family farmed at Wongan Hills while she was in primary school. High school years were at Northam where to keep up contact with friends and sport, she remained a boarder when the family moved to farm at Toodyay. Sylvia says she was lucky that her school had great athletics role models such as Shirley Strickland and MAWA's own Irwin Barrett-Leonard.

Sylvia has always been interested in sport of any kind including athletics; mainly long distance running at high school, due to encouragement from an older brother who was a pole vaulter. Some Saturdays in the 1950s brother and sister jumped on a train from Northam to compete in track and field at Leederville Oval. In one of those cringe-worthy "Dad moments" Sylvia recalls not wanting to stand near her dad when her brother was pole vaulting "...because one of dad's legs would rise and fall as my brother soared upwards."

Sylvia trained as a teacher and enjoyed a 60-year career with the Department of Education, specializing in students who learn differently and culminating as principal of Chidley Education Centre, a live-in government facility in Perth for "...primary aged intelligent kids from the bush who struggled with literacy." Sylvia is currently a casual teacher as well as a registered volunteer with the Retired Educator Volunteers for Isolated Student Education (REVISE) program; living with and helping tutors and students who are enrolled with one of the five Schools of the Air in this state.

At age 75 Sylvia took up race-walking. She had an interest in field events too but was discouraged from pursuing these by an inter-state field coach and is now content to tackle any walking event. Sylvia was encouraged to join the WA Race Walking Club (WARWC) by highly skilled MAWA walker Karyn Tolardo, something Sylvia also endorses – "I received excellent training and would



In focus

With Carmel Meyer

encourage new walkers to join this group where coaching is available to set you up for good technique." Sylvia also makes good use of the internet to help avoid getting those red cards. Injuries haven't plagued her too much but she admits she ran out of puff for reasons since discovered so had to slow down for a bit. Despite warnings from WARWC coach Rosie, Sylvia says "I am inclined to go at things like a bull at a gate – as the saying goes".

Sylvia feels fortunate to have two of her three adult children alive and well, their partners, four grandchildren and two great-grandchildren who all help to make for wonderful family times. A kayaking enthusiast on both ocean and river, paddling as a family pursuit means so much to Sylvia. She tells of paddling off Penguin Island when a lone paddler asked what group they were. "We are the Byers family-come join us", was their friendly reply. Sylvia also likes to swim year-round at Cottesloe and brushes off concerns about sharks by saying "...we get warnings." As an experienced paddler, Sylvia had intended volunteering for kayaking events at the 2009 Sydney World Masters Games. Instead, she enrolled in athletics events with one of her sisters. This was the beginning of Sylvia's involvement with Masters and Walking. Sylvia is not one to shirk a challenge so, although she had just learned to swim properly, she entered two events in her age group. Sylvia says she came last in the 50m freestyle and second last in backstroke "...but I had swum in the Sydney Olympic pool and my sister and I had fun!"

Sylvia acknowledges "I have done well for an oldie taking up race walking late in life."

CONTINUED – next page



Photo: TOM LENANE

land, sea or sky

FROM - previous page

She competed in the 2016 World Championships in Perth coming second to a Canadian competitor in both the 5000m and 10,000m walks. One of her targets is to train for and compete in walks at the 2018 AMA championships in Perth.

"Another target is to stay on my feet!"

Sylvia also aims to compete in the 85 plus group at the 2020 World Athletics Championships in Toronto. She says it is easy to be motivated by the enthusiasm of other athletes of all ages as well as those who volunteer their time in all sorts of weather. She admires competitors and helpers of Little Athletics and the encouragement given to walkers of all ages on Sunday morning events held by the WARWC. As a 'raw beginner' Sylvia recalls fronting up for MAWA athletics and race-walking as fast as she could with young runners whizzing by. With her usual good humour Sylvia says, "I called out 'wait for me' but no one seemed to hear!"

Always one who aims to give back, Sylvia is currently looking to help out by training as a walks judge. She says, "There is a lot involved in walk judging but by working at it I aim to be fair to all competitors." At a community level, Sylvia is heavily involved in the Rotary Foundation. This includes travel to check the value of Rotary-funded projects related to basic education and literacy. Sylvia went to Taiwan and India in 2016 and Tonga this year. "Walking shoes are always packed or worn." Digging a little deeper I discovered that Sylvia became a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2002 for her contribution to the education of students rural and remote, state and national levels and to Rotary International. A great honour and obviously well deserved.

I wondered what other interests this fascinating lady might have and I wasn't disappointed – Sylvia is a pilot! She tells it so well in her own words:

I took up flying in 1979 because of the challenge it offered. It was something I thought beyond me – especially landing the plane. I will have a go at most things and when working in Bunbury saw a tiny advertisement in the local paper that read "Do you want to learn to fly?" That was it! I got my private pilot's licence in 1980 just before going to Indiana University in the USA to take up a Rotary scholarship. In order to fly in the USA and

I had to transfer my licence and fronted up at a US office in Indianapolis to answer questions such as height, weight etc. To the latter, I replied '9 stone 4lbs' and was then asked 'big ones or little ones'? He took me off and weighed me. The US worked only in pounds. The local tower guys in Bloomington saw me as a sport and at one time told me to "go round – dingo sighted on the runway but they knew nothing about a tucker box and lamingtons!" As someone who enjoys the company and support of both masters and junior athletes Sylvia is disappointed when her competitive flying events clash with Sunday athletics. She competes in flying competitions at club level and enters for the annual National Light Aircraft Championships. For any women

out there who feel inclined, Sylvia aims to increase the number of female competitors. Over the last few years, she has been the oldest competitor, male or female, registered for the light aircraft nationals. "Age is not a factor in this sport," says Sylvia. She recounts a common saying in flying that any landing you can walk away from is a good landing, however, I don't think near enough is anywhere near good enough for Sylvia as her favourite events are the practice forced landing and precision spot landing!

So now you know; not only is Sylvia Byers a lady with a megawatt smile and fierce race walking skills she is also a lady who grabs life with both hands and... takes off!



Sylvia Byers leads Lorna Lauchlan at the World Championships last year.

Photo: TOM LENANE