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Sent: Saturday, September 24, 2005 10:19 PM

Subject: Obit to Les Perry by Ron Clarke

Salute to a Great Friend - Les Perry, Athlete Extraordinaire

21 September 2005 | 9.30am

<http://www.athletics.org.au/news/details.cfm?ObjectID=2615&ReturnString=%3Fview%5Fby%5Fmonth%3D2005%2C09>

John Landy refers to the diminutive Williamstown athlete as the "Father of Australian Distance Running". Les Perry was that and more.

He was our first distance athlete to hold his own internationally having the confidence to lead his hero, Emil Zatopek, in the Olympic 10,000 metres in Helsinki in 1952, and then to finish sixth in one of the most famous Olympic 5,000 metres in history.

The drama of the last lap with the favourite, and race leader, German Herbert Schade being passed down the back straight by the cocky Englishman, Chris Chataway who, in turn, was then passed around the final bend by Zatopek, with Frenchman Alain Mimoun in his wake. Chataway staggered, stepped on the curb, and fell. Countryman Gordon Pirie saw his chance and sprinted to pass his bitter rival and capture fourth position behind Zatopek and Mimoun but in front of Schade and Chataway. Les Perry followed on next. An Australian up there with the immortals of distance racing.

We had two other distance runners in the team in 1952 as well as Les. Don McMillan and John Landy both competed in the 1500 metres.

All had been a part of the Percy Cerutti squad before Helsinki but went their own way after the Games inspired by the great Czech and convinced they could vastly improve their own performances by following his example and enthusiasm.

Landy, of course, did best and showed what can be done by dedicated training and a unique talent. But whereas John virtually trained alone churning out 600 metre repetitions around the gravel paths of the neighbourhood Park in East Malvern often in the early hours of the morning after a day at the University followed by study

assignments, Les developed his own group at his club in Williamstown.

There he was everything, he coached, trained, organised meetings, did the secretarial work, raised money for a cinder track and continued to win national titles. Like Zatopek, he graduated to marathons, racing against him again in Melbourne at the 1956 Games in Melbourne in 30 degree heat.

Later he married and moved with his new family to East Ringwood where he was totally responsible for my re-introduction to athletics. After a pretty successful career as a junior, I was distracted after National Service (three months in the Army) from which I never really recovered. Six years later, married with two young children, Helen and I purchased a new home in Heathmont just around the corner from Les.

Next to getting married to Helen, this has to be the most fortunate decision I'd ever made because the day we moved in Les had me out running with him, showing me how unfit I was, and then recommending I train at Caulfield Racecourse "on the way home from the office".

Everything I ever did in athletics had its base from that relatively short run with Les, and his equally "ancient" friend, local mayor Bob Horman. Both were in their forties at the time and yet they had to wait for me, at 24, to catch up after every hill.

Typically Les founded a local club, Ringwood, organised the Council to provide land and a track, raised the money for Clubrooms, and soon did for Ringwood what he had done for Williamstown a decade earlier. He was indefatigable and always there for me over the years. No matter how badly I mucked up he'd be there encouraging, believing, supporting and, if I asked, advising.

It was Les who organised the Zatopek 10,000m race in honour of his great friend so naturally I ran in the event for the first five or so years of its existence, winning them all. I even set my first world records in 1963 at the race.

If you want to talk about legends in this sport, then little Les Perry was the greatest of them all, the pioneer, the inspirer, the one who devoted himself completely and unselfishly to the development of our sport.

There have been none greater than my wonderful friend, mentor and supporter.
Vale mate, we all owe you.

Ron Clarke.
20th September, 2005

P.S. by Ron. John Landy is our state governor and the first man to have run a legal four minute mile.