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Chapter 1

Off to a good start

“It seems an age since half a dozen unfit, overweight slobs first met at Balmoral Oval and exhausted themselves by half running, half walking five laps.”

-- Norths Joggers News, July 1971

Running is the simplest sport. You just put on your running shoes, go out the door and start. But in the 1960s not many people actually did that, unless they were members of a registered athletics club. If you saw someone running down the street, they were more likely to be a burglar than a jogger.

So it possibly came as somewhat of a surprise when the following notice appeared in the Journal of the North Sydney Leagues Club in May 1967.

JOGGERS' CLUB

It has been decided to start a Joggers Club in which all interested members are invited to participate. Jogging has been found to be extremely beneficial to a healthy life and has also been endorsed by the National Heart Foundation.

The venue will be Balmoral Oval, commencing at 9 a.m, every Sunday.

It is hoped at a later stage to have a qualified medical practitioner in attendance each Sunday to check on members' fitness.

For further particulars contact Dave McErlane or Bill Kerr in the Gymnasium.

To appreciate how and why this notice came about, we need to first understand the role of the Leagues Club, and how it fitted into the Sydney scene.

Norths Leagues Club had originally opened in 1955 as a social club aimed at assisting the growth of rugby league in the North Sydney district. It was only the second club of its type in NSW. Football was its passion, and in particular the North Sydney Football Club – the “Bears”.

The Bears have been described as one of the most enigmatic football teams in the world. It has certainly had a long and proud history. It was one of the nine foundation clubs that played in the inaugural 1908 NSW Rugby League season (under the name of the Shoremen). By 1967 it was one of only five of these that had survived. But the length of its history was not matched by its success on the field. Norths had won only two premierships, in 1921 and 1922, and since then the trophy cabinet had been bare.

By 1967, when the Joggers Club notice appeared, Norths had not won a premiership for over forty years. In the previous year, 1966, it had endured a miserable season, finishing second last, with the final game of the season being attended by fewer than 4,000 spectators. The problem was, it seemed, not lack of brilliance. At the time, Norths fielded players such as the Test winger Ken Irvine, the brilliant George Ambrum and the goal kicking genius Freddy Griffiths. But, as the football club historian Andrew Moore comments in his book *The Mighty Bears*, for some of this period it seemed that the club did not always possess thirteen fit and enthusiastic players of first grade standard. This decline ushered in a particularly prolonged low period for the Bears. In the 1970s and 1980s, Moore comments that, just as a wine connoisseur might evaluate a fine red, some fans of the Bears came to savour the various forms of defeat -- the last-minute acquiescence, the total eighty minute collapse, the ten minute concentration lapse, or the second-half flop. As it happened, Norths would eventually recover, and go on to enjoy a golden period of success during the 1990s – though still without capturing another premiership -- only to disappear as a first division team in 1999 after a short-lived, debt-induced “merger” with another club to form the so-called Northern Eagles. This in turn disappeared in 2003. Norths currently play only in the second-level Premier League, but all true Bears fans still dream that one day Norths will return in triumph to the top division.

Back in 1967, however, in contrast to the declining fortunes of the football club, the Leagues Club was enjoying a boom in membership and finances. Between 1965 and 1969 membership mushroomed from 8,500 to over 20,000. This was no doubt partly due to the Club’s move to its current, larger, premises in Cammeray. The burgeoning finances of the club came partly from bar sales, but overwhelmingly from the relatively new handle-operated poker machines – the so-called “one armed bandits”.

The club provided a wide range of entertainment for its members and guests. The years round 1967 were the golden era of the television show *Bandstand*, hosted by Brian Henderson, and many of the performers that appeared at the Leagues Club around this time were familiar from that show – Bill Newman, Bryan Davies, Neil Williams, Noeleen Batley and Barry Crocker. Other familiar acts from that period included the Delltones, Lucky Starr, Dig Richards and Dinah Lee.

Right from the start of its operations, the Leagues Club had also fostered activities other than football. At first these were snooker and fishing, with other internal clubs specialising in sports such as cricket, basketball and table tennis. Crucially to our story, however, the club’s new facilities at Cammeray also included a gymnasium. Its first manager was physiotherapist Dave McErlane, who in later years would accompany the Australian cricket team on a number of overseas tours. Bill Kerr, the other person mentioned in the Joggers Club notice, also worked at the gym and would later act as a fitness coach for some of Australia’s leading tennis players.

One of the activities at the gym was the aerobic exercise class, which consisted of running laps of the gym, interspersed with various exercises. In 1966, the New Zealand running coach Arthur Lydiard had published a book, *Run for Your Life*, which introduced the concept of jogging as a means of attaining physical fitness and the resultant health benefits. Dave and Bill embraced this new concept, the result being that some of the exercise classes included leaving the gym, running to nearby

Tunks Park and completing a lap of the park before returning to the gym. Several members became keen on this “jogging” and as a group would run round the streets of Cammeray and Cremorne several times a week. From these modest beginnings was born the rather novel idea of starting up a club devoted just to jogging. And so the Norths Joggers were born.

The appeal of jogging

So what was it that made jogging seem like a good thing to do?

One aspect of its appeal was its simplicity. As Jogger Jargon pointed out in May 1970: “In jogging there is no organisation, no rules to follow, no specific times or places for doing it, and no financial expenditure necessary. So think about it!” Reflecting this simplicity, Norths Joggers originally had no formal membership requirements and no fees. You just turned up and jogged.

Another strong attraction was the health benefit. Right from the beginning, there was a strong association drawn between jogging, fitness and health. This association was partly due to the Club’s origins in the gymnasium, but also reflected the influence of various respected jogging and health authorities who came into prominence about this time. Numerous Jogger Jargons provided extracts from the works of people such as Percy Cerutti (trainer of Herb Elliott and author of *Be Fit or be Damned*), the running legend Ron Clarke, and the previously mentioned Arthur Lydiard. Here are some of the nuggets of information that Jogger Jargon passed on to its readers:

- Jogging has been found to be extremely beneficial to a healthy lifestyle, and has also been endorsed by the National Heart Foundation
- It is not merely that you are alive, but *how much* alive you are that is important
- Running is as natural as eating, and should be considered an essential form of movement, not merely a sport for the young or an eccentricity for the old
- The heart of the average unfit person beats almost 30,000 times a day more than that of a fit person – over a year, that means that the heart of the unfit person will be forced to beat 11 million times more than if its owner had exercised properly
- Physical fitness cannot be obtained by sitting in the Sauna Room at the Leagues Club (this would definitely have come as a shock to some)
- The average time that a Commonwealth public servant lives after retirement is only two years (to which the obvious reply was – how can you tell?).

Arthur Lydiard was especially influential at this time, and when he visited Australia a number of the Joggers went to hear him give a talk at Narrabeen Fitness Centre. During the talk, someone asked Lydiard to demonstrate his running style. Lydiard, rather sheepishly, “ran” from one end of the stage to the other, a total distance of about 20 feet. It was a bit like seeing a demonstration of long distance swimming in a bath, but everyone had a good laugh about it afterwards.

Jogger Jargon never tired of providing sensible advice such as: “Remember: (1) go to the doctor for a regular check up; (2) exercise more; (3) eat less; and (4) weigh yourself daily.” It also regularly inspired members and prospective members with somewhat double-edged exhortations such as:

- Old Joggers never die, they only smell that way
- Don’t be a log, get out and jog
- A jog a day keeps the doctor away
- Exercise and die healthy

Fast fact: In November 1967, in order to publicise the government’s health and fitness campaign, Channel 2 came down to Balmoral to film a segment on the Joggers Club for its popular Sports Cavalcade program.

In retrospect, it could be suggested that some of the health benefits claimed for running in early Jogger Jargons were possibly a little exuberantly expressed. It once observed, for example, that for the long distance runner, cholesterol is “virtually non-existent” because continuous training creates a “continued flushing of the arterial system”. If only it were so! Running was also credited with some impressive medical cures. In 1968 Jogger Jargon commented “this may or may not be true, but there is living proof how exercise, and in the main running, has contributed to the recovery of what would be ‘hopeless cases’. We have had a chronic asthma sufferer, a bad motor vehicle accident victim, and a person with a disability from birth. All those people have had a remarkable recovery, in some instances 100%.”

That said, there was no doubt that the club was producing some extremely fit individuals. In 1971, eight Joggers went to have their aerobic levels (“VO2 max”) scientifically tested. Each scored an “excellent” rating, with Peter Stebbins ranking as the fittest.

Jogger Jargon could, of course, see the funnier side of the health benefits as well.

Doctor: Your condition is deplorable. I suggest that you go jogging morning, noon and night.

Patient: Will all that jogging make me live longer, doctor?

Doctor: No, but it will *seem* longer.

Apart from simplicity and health, another of jogging’s undoubted attractions was that there was no age limit. In 1971, Jogger Jargon reminded prospective members that one of our most active members, Jim Bell, was 70 years old. It went on, no doubt tongue in cheek: “age is only relative, because many fine athletes throughout the

world are still performing in top-class company well into their 40s – for example, Pancho Gonzales, Archie Moore (!!) and Gus Risman (!!!) to name just a few.” (As we’ll see, Archie and Gus were early office-bearers of the club.) Later that same year, Jogger Jargon continued the theme by pointing out that “one of our stalwarts, John Curtis, actually walked across the Harbour Bridge on the day it was opened, and he is still going strong.”

For many, of course, the competitive element was also an attraction. Some people just love the thrill of testing yourself against others. It could also be intriguing to find out for yourself how fast (or otherwise) you could get. And, of course, there were the undoubted social benefits of belonging to a club – a major factor in the continuing success of the club.

Jogger Jargon summed the attractions up well: “The benefits include pleasant social company, exercise, fitness, weight control, regular competition races and no pressure, as everyone sets their own pace.” It apparently was a winning formula. Membership grew rapidly. Andrew Moore specifically mentions in his book that the recently-formed Joggers Club had quickly developed “an especially strong sense of camaraderie” – an attribute that we like to think has been preserved to this day.

What else was happening?

At the time the Joggers Club was about to make its first, modest appearance, what was happening in the wider world?

The Australia of 1967 was a very different world than today. The new-fangled decimal currency had only recently been introduced to replace the old pounds, shillings and pence. Ronald Ryan had just been hanged for murdering a prison officer, and was destined to be the last person to be executed in Australia. A brash young Gough Whitlam had just been appointed as Leader of the Opposition.

On the international scene, there were some ominous clouds on the horizon. Australia was actively building up its forces in Vietnam, encouraged by US military commander General Westmoreland’s assurance that that military defeat there was unthinkable. Meanwhile, in America, massive war protest marches were starting, race riots were breaking out, and boxer Muhammad Ali was stripped of his world heavyweight title for refusing the draft. China was exploding its first H-bomb, and Che Guevara was captured and executed in Bolivia. The Six Day War between Egypt and Israel erupted, further poisoning Middle East politics for decades.

On the popular culture front, people had transistor radios glued to their ears listening to *Respect* by Aretha Franklin, *Michelle* by the Beatles and *Strangers in the Night* by Frank Sinatra. At the cinema, people flocked to see Michael Caine in *Alfie*, Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate* and Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty in *Bonnie and Clyde*. Charles Chaplin released his last film, and the rock musical *Hair* opened in New York, signalling a possible end of civilisation by featuring naked drug-taking actors live on the stage.

1967 would also be the year of the first heart transplant, the mysterious disappearance of Prime Minister Harold Holt at Portsea Beach, the decriminalisation of abortion in

England, and the launch of the supersonic Concorde aeroplane. But there were yet bigger changes in store. The world's population was set to almost double in the next 40 years. Man had not yet walked on the Moon. There were no home computers, no mobile phones, no Sydney Opera House, and Elvis was still slim.

In sport, Australia was still enjoying its glory days in many disciplines. In 1967 John Newcombe would win his first Wimbledon and Jack Brabham reigned as the Formula 1 world champion. Australia was also incredibly strong in competitive running. Ron Clarke was in the middle of setting his series of 17 world records over distances of 5,000 metres upwards. Later in 1967, Derek Clayton would also run his phenomenal 2:09:36 marathon at Fukuoka, smashing the world best time by three minutes.

Despite this, as we've already suggested, most people still considered running as just something that talented athletes did, usually on a track. The running boom was still years away. Mention a "fun run" in 1967 and you would only get quizzical looks. The City to Surf was unimaginable, and would not start till four years later. The Nike "swoosh" did not exist, and the concept of triathlons had not even been contemplated. Bill Kerr remembers how people driving by in cars would constantly call out to joggers "Are you lost? Want a lift?" (Some people, of course, still do this.)

The other odd aspect was that long distance racing, or even middle distance racing, was still an official "no go" zone for at least half of the population -- women. Participation in the Boston Marathon was restricted to males, and the 1967 race saw the famous (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt to physically eject Katherine Switzer from the course. Women were in fact prohibited from running races of more than 800 metres at the Olympics, and an Olympic marathon for women was still seventeen years away.

These restrictions, which seem ridiculous today, actually reflected some general social attitudes that were commonly held at the time. It's interesting, for example, that membership of Norths Leagues Club was originally restricted to males, and that in 1967 women were still only admitted in the company of a (male) club member. Even then, they were confined to the mixed lounge, and were not allowed in the main bar. Two years later, women were allowed to be associate members, but could not use the gymnasium, or make dinner reservations! Despite these restrictions, 5,800 women associates joined within a few months. Women would eventually be admitted to full membership in 1984.