

My Life in Rowing Bob Russell

Educated at Public Schools, I always thought that rowing was a “snotty nosed College and University sport.” That all changed when an old High School mate invited me to come to the Torrens Rowing Club (TRC) on a Saturday afternoon in 1955 to watch him train. Reluctantly, I agreed, but I knew we would have a few beers after. On arrival, I was introduced to Doc O’Brien, the Captain, who immediately asked if I would fill in for a crew that needed to go out. I agreed and from that day on, 69 years later (2024), I’m still rowing.



At that time, I was an apprentice fitter and machinist at the SA Railways Islington Workshops, so I co-opted another three apprentices to form a Novice Four with cox – B Vasey, R Grindlay, G Clode and myself (photo). We started to train and were coached by Brian Thomas. We won the first of our races at Port Adelaide, beating a crew from SA Railway Institute Rowing Club.



So began my very successful rowing career at TRC. We won SA Championship Maiden 8 and Champion Junior 4, consisting of Gary Clode, Rod Cornelius, Bruce ('Porky') Robertson and myself. This four combined with the TRC Senior four to form the club Senior 8 and this crew won the state Champion Senior 8s for seven (7) consecutive years. The event was raced over both a 3 mile (4.5 km) course and, from 1959 onward, over 2000 metres. There were crew replacements in that Senior 8+ over that period, but I represented TRC in all seven annual events – that still stands as a Club 8 state record.

Three incidents come to mind whilst rowing in the Senior 8+ and Senior 4+.

1. My first race at Renmark in the Senior 8+ was over 3 miles and for the whole distance, the Renmark bowman never stopped remarking about my rowing ability with comments like “p...weak Torrens bowman” and “couldn’t pull the skin off a sausage”... and a lot worse. But we won the race by a couple of lengths, after which both crews adjourned to the pub for a few pints. The Renmark bowman grudgingly offered to buy me a pint. He handed the glass to me with a laugh – a pint of port wine!

2. We were training on the Port River one evening. I was in the bow seat when suddenly there was the sound of splintering wood. Looking around, I saw that we were hard against a navigation beacon with a large flashing green light. I yelled a few expletives and “are you blind you ... moron cox”, amongst other pieces of Railway Workshop abuse. Remember, in those days there were no ‘tinnies’ and the coach took the cox’s seat. That coach/cox was no other than our senior coach, Bryan Draper. We managed to get the boat back to the Port RC shed – wet, cold and very unhappy.

3. The next incident occurred the following day during the Senior 4 last training session before the State championships. We were half way through the session, when the 3-man, Cliff “swivel-head” Graetz turned around and gave the bowman (ie, me) a roasting about my rowing ability. Next minute, there was a splash, an expletive and a shout “see if you can do it without me!” as the bowman leapt out of the boat, swam to shore and left, his Renault Gordini doing a burnout, and leaving 3 rowers, a cox and a coach staring as the car headed home. After phone calls from the coach and stroke that night, I turned up at the regatta on the following day and took my place in the bow seat. The crew won the championship by four lengths (the 3-man was very silent).

Besides having an exceptionally rewarding 15 years of rowing, I also served on the TRC Committee for **21 years** – as Committee member, Treasurer, Senior Coach, Captain, Vice President and President.

I was selected in eleven (11) King’s Cup squads. My first in 1959 was as reserve in the last King’s cup rowed over 3 miles (4.5km). In 1960, the race was contested over the Olympic test race distance of 2000 metres and has remained so ever since.

In the following 10 years of King’s Cup crews, I rowed as stroke, seven, five, three, two and bow.

The photo is of my blazer pocket recording my connection to rowing and the many National events.



My last King's Cup was in 1969 in Bundaberg, Qld; I then retired and concentrated on coaching at club level and state lightweight crews.

A very good crop of LW rowers from CBC, amongst others, formed the basis of TRC's unbeaten record in LW8, LW4+, LW2+ and LW2- over multiple seasons in the mid to late 60s and early 70s.

My interstate coaching career started in 1970 and continued for 17 years, including 3 King's Cup crews, 9 Penrith Cup crews, a Youth 8 and a Women's four.

My first interstate title was in 1970 with SA's first ever win in the Penrith Cup for LW4+. The crew (photo) was Luigi Lippis, stroke, 3 Bob Cooper, 2 Vaughn Bollen and bow, Colin Smith, coxed by Geoff Worth. Reserves were Michael Eastaughffe and Peter Cooper. Three of these LWs (bow, 2 and 3) were selected in various Australian crews over the period 1974-1980.



According to all the media and bankside critics, on the night prior to the race, Luigi took control of our evening meal – a bowl of “Italian pasta for the carbs that we need for tomorrow”. We had a crew chat and I sent the crew off to bed, while I spent a few hours with some Ballarat mates, having a few ales and checking the weather conditions for the next day. We were up early next morning and walked to the Club to check the boat and oars. Reflecting on my chat with the locals on the previous night, I increased Luigi's inboard oar span by a quarter of an inch, just to give a little more if needed, Lui was a very good stroke and I knew he would give it all. The crew was as ready as possible. As it turned out, we rowed away from NSW over the last 500 metres, after a close and well fought tussle for the first 1500. History records the result as a surprise – but history did not ask the four rowers and cox for their thoughts.

When I saw that finish, I could not help myself. I passed my camera to someone nearby and walked fully clothed into Lake Wendouree to congratulate the crew. Later, at the presentation, when my turn came for the medal presentation, the Victorian Governor said, “King Neptune has risen from the depths”.

In 1974, I coached the winning National Champion LW2+, held in Ballarat and stroked by Bob Cooper, with Vaughn Bollen in the bow seat and coxed by Geoff Worth (photo).



Over the next couple of years, I coached the TRC Senior 8 and was successful in 1976 winning the SA Championship Senior 8+. AUBC were red hot favourites, but TRC caused an upset. Members of that crew, Bill Dankbaar and Frank Quigley were selected in the 1976 King's Cup crew, with me as first time State coach after 11 years as a rower. We came third in that Interstate regatta, 11.6 seconds behind NSW and then 0.09 seconds behind Victoria. This was the Olympic selection test race, so I was happy with that performance.

In that same year (1976), I was awarded Life Membership of TRC.

I coached the King's Cup 8+ again in 1977 coming second to NSW.

The women's crew I coached in 1980 represented SA in the Women's Interstate Four-Oared Championship race at Lake Wendouree, Ballarat, competing for what was then called the ULVA trophy. This was the selection race for the Moscow Olympics, and the crew performed very well to finish second to Victoria. The ULVA trophy was first presented to the winning women's four in 1920 by the United Licensed Victuallers Association. It became the trophy for the winning Women's Eights in 1999 and was renamed the Queen Elizabeth II Trophy, or simply the Queen's Cup (also nicknamed, Bertha).

The 1988 King's Cup regatta and National Championships, held on the Nepean River, NSW, saw a composite TRC LW8+ win and the TRC/AUBC LW4- win the Senior B LW4-. The next day, the Penrith cup was raced, but an unfortunate coaching change to that LW4- saw them go from a medal chance to a disastrous last.

In that same regatta, my SA eight came second to Victoria, beating NSW who had half of the winning World Championship crew in England.

The Victorian crew was coached by Brian Richardson, a rowing partner of mine in King's Cup crews and a TRC coxed pair. Brian and I, coxed by Bob Potter, won a silver medal at the Australian National regatta held at Murray Bridge in 1967 (photo).

Brian was a grinder in Australia II's win of the America's Cup in 1983. And more trivia, all four grinders on that yacht were ex-Australian rowers.



The Youth 8+ in 1983 was raced on the Canning River in Perth. This was SA's first national win in the Noel F. Wilkinson Cup. It was a close race, winning by 0.03 sec from Victoria after a long wait and insistence by the SA judge (Bob Pennington) over two Victorian judges for video analysis of the finish.



The crew (photo) was P. Giacchino (manager), T. Belcher, S. Munday, P. Winter, J. Smith, R. Booth, R. Rowlands (cox), M. Emery, M. McInerney, J. Mayne and Bob Russell (coach)

Yet another piece of trivia. Just prior to this Youth 8+ race, I told the cox to take his traditional head mounted megaphone, as I wasn't confident of these new-fangled electronic microphones and speakers. Guess what? About 400 metres from the finish, just as the race was building - no sound! Our cox, Robert Rowlands ("Brattie") placed the old-fashioned megaphone on his head. The crew responded immediately to catch the Vics and ultimately take the narrowest of wins.

I continued coaching TRC into the 1980s with a new young group of LWs. Cousins Gavin and Craig Russell, along with Mark Footer and Tim Burns. Gavin and Craig were a good combo and made some of the senior pairs from other clubs watch their wake drift past them. They held the LW2- state title for three consecutive years. The LW4- also competed well for the club winning a state title in a great race over AUBC.

Around 1984, Matthew Draper took over the LW coaching role and as Penrith Cup coach.

The Interstate Championship regatta was held in WA in 1989. The TRC crew of Gavin Russell and Tim Burns won the Under 23 LW 2- and a composite TRC/AUBC crew of Gavin Russell and David Belcher were placed second in the Men's pair. This regatta was run in conditions that were worsening due to a cyclone off the coast. In fact, the regatta was cancelled immediately after their race and most interstate championships could not be raced at the regatta.

I then retired from coaching and started to row in the masters' regattas, competing well in all classes of boats.

A new part of my rowing career started in 1990/91 when I formed a TRC pair with John Tonkin. This lasted a decade and focussed initially on the art of coxless pair rowing. We conquered this art with many trips to Mildura/Wentworth, Nagambie and Penrith with the "Ray Carter" pair on top of my ute. The solution, as always, is lots of time and miles in the boat.

We won gold in the MMD2- Perth Masters Games in 1993 (photo), which encouraged us to aim for the 1994 World Masters in Brisbane. As a prelude to the 1994 Worlds, we had gold medal wins in the Victorian Masters championships at Wentworth, the SA championships and a silver in the NSW championships at Penrith. The race at Penrith was on the Nepean River and the course differed from the usual Kings Cup course by going under the Railway/road bridges. We were 2 lengths clear as we came under the bridge and, as we looked in control of the race, I made the (poor) decision to keep the rating the same. We were second by a canvas, as another error on my part was not to check the angle of the finish line due to the bridge – a lesson learned.



The Brisbane World championships of 1994 finally arrived and, having trained hard, we departed with high hopes. We made it through the heats to be in the final 8 crews in the world - an achievement in itself. But the weather was not good and the water was getting choppier even as we rowed to the start. By the 500 metre mark of the race, we were half full of water. We, along with all others, had to battle through absurd conditions. Unfortunately, we were unplaced and, in fact, lucky to get to the bank without sinking. It was a disappointment – but that's rowing sometimes. At least next day, John and I were asked to row in a Mix8+, this time in flat water and a silver medal. Many beers were had.

After the Worlds, we continued to row together, but changed from the pair to a double as we both had slight back problems. We decided to not train as hard but to enjoy the racing – if we made the final, well and good.

Rowing has been a great part of my life with no regrets. I know I had Kathleen's (my wife) full support throughout all those years. I never achieved the heights I dreamt of, but I know I have played a significant part in assisting rowers from TRC and many others on their way to selection in Australian crews.

In 2004, Kathy and I moved to Port Elliot to retire by the seaside (and a rowing club). I joined Goolwa RC and have sculled, swept and coached there since – but that's another story.

In 2024, we left Adelaide and now reside in Sydney, continuing to enjoy our retirement.

EDITOR. The following is an extract of a speech at Bob's farewell from Goolwa RC provided by his brother, Ian.

To Bob and Kathy Russell, guests of honour at Goolwa RC farewell function. Memorable moments related by Ian, younger brother of Bob, and brother-in-law to Kathy.

Bob Russell as a coach and oarsman, Past Captain, Past President and Life Member of Torrens RC.

Any person who has rowed with or been coached by Bob Russell would relate to the few following memorable moments in Bob's colourful rowing life.

Bob rowing in the bow seat of the Torrens Senior coxed four on the last night of training at Port Adelaide before the SARA Championships when Cliff Graetz made a comment which was not taken well by the bow man. Bob uttered a few expletives and made his feelings clearly known to the crew, then jumped overboard, swam to shore, stomped up the beach, collected his gear and drove off, leaving coach Jack Bollen gob-smacked on the shore.

Torrens won the Championship race easily on Saturday. All was forgiven, but not forgotten.

Bob rowing in a Torrens master's eight in the Victorian Masters Championships at Wentworth in a very good crew but having little training together, with brother Ian in the stroke seat, Bob in the seven seat. At the start a Banks RC crew were in the lane adjoining. Bob looked across and saw Terry Davies, Vic rowing legend in the stroke seat and the red line fever cut in. Race plan out the window right from the start as Bobby had decided to stroke the boat from the seven seat. The crew took off at a high rating and Ian needed five half strokes to catch up while trying to maintain some semblance of the agreed race plan, and then it was on for the 1000 metres.

Banks gradually slipped behind, and Torrens won by clear water. A memorable row.

Bob rowing in a Torrens coxless masters quad on West Lakes with Ian again in the stroke seat. Starting in lane one all was going well until a steering correction was necessary to maintain the line. The course changed from lane one to lane zero managing to clip several buoys on the way. Then more steering was required to retrieve lane one and more buoys were punished. Mutterings were heard coming from the three seat while stroke oversteered into lane two. Fortunately, we were behind the crew in lane two at this stage, but frustration was building, and the mutterings became more direct and loud as the buoys suffered as we rowed along the buoy line. Finally, back into lane one to cross the finish line.

Bobby was not happy, and the younger sibling was told in no uncertain terms never to steer a coxless boat again. Fortunately, Bill Carey stepped up and steered successfully from that time on. Case in point, a good second place in the Ballarat

World Masters Championships MMH4x with Kevin Keogh bow, Bob two seat, Ian three, and Bill stroke.

Bob always committed to the task at hand, setting a high standard for both himself and the crews he coached. But beware, there was always a hint of danger when a rower questioned a coaching decision, or a crew misbehaved.

Case in point, the young and developing Torrens MLW4- rowing at a river-land regatta with Craig Russell, Mark Footer, Tim Burns and Gavin Russell winning easily but clearly not taking the race seriously by trying a few skill exercises in the last 500 metres. Bob, Kathy, Ian and Pam were quietly sitting in the hotel after the regatta and the boys casually walked in pleased with the day's racing. They walked into a storm, being told more than forcefully what was expected of a Torrens crew when representing the club on the water, and particularly at a regatta. Their behavior was noted, and training sessions following that regatta may have been quite interesting.

Kathy has supported Bob's rowing career with grace and tolerance over the many years of rowing and coaching with Torrens, with SA Interstate Championship crews as an oarsman and coach, and coach of Pembroke School, and Goolwa RC.