

My life in rowing

Ian Russell

Memories of Torrens Rowing Club and beyond.

I commenced rowing at TRC age 17 in 1959, following brother Bob into the club. At that time, TRC had a very strong membership and was undefeated in senior 8's and 4's.

The competitive rowers were fully backed by the TRC older oarsmen and their support group, headed by Allan Southcott, Frank Lodge, Jack Bollen, Peter and Remo Morelli, Peter Mitchell snr, Alf Gregory, Frank O'Brien, Ray and Dean Carter, Phil and Margaret Lord, Bruce Roberts, Vin Baccharelli, Doug Saunders, Laurie Baulderstone and others.

Ray Carter and Phil Lord reliably and tirelessly transported the SA boat trailer to the National Championships and Kings Cup regattas across Australia in the 70's and 80's



Sunday morning rowing discussions over a few beers around the 'long table' were always interesting and certainly colourful. I recall these older members proudly recounting that, back in the good old days, Torrens Rowing Club was a popular and well attended Saturday night dance venue.

The then Captain of the club, Laurie Balderstone recruited apprentices from AW Baulderstone, Building Contractors in Norwood to sign up as members. Doug Vincent, John and Peter Blank, Peter Mitchell, Dennis Beck, David Plumb and others were all recruited by Laurie.

Another source of members before my time was the SA Railways Islington workshops with Slim Lawrence, Garry Clode and my brother, Bob Russell, joining the Club. Bob had been attracted to join by Rodney Cornelius, both members of the Kilkenny Scout Group. Rodney, Bob and Garry were crew members of the successful 60's winning Senior 8's and 4's.

Slim rowed and coached for the club, and after rowing, promoted TRC at CBC which proved to be a fertile ground for CBC leavers to join the club. Slim coached CBC for many years, strengthening the bond with Torrens.

My first major rowing success was winning the 1960–61 SARA Championship Maiden 8+ coached by Bryan Draper. Interesting race, in which TRC had been beaten by other crews in lead up races. At 750m out from the start, two crews clashed and the race was stopped and re-started. Stroke John Blank called for a sprint at the re-start and a high rating with 1000m to the finish. TRC won convincingly.

A season 1960 – 61 disappointment was not winning Championship Junior 4+ which was held at Port Adelaide on a rough, windy day. Leading with 500m to go, I caught a crab and went for a swim. Very embarrassing - Bryan, our coach, not happy.

My next major rowing success was winning the season 1960–61 SARA Championship LW4+ coached by Bryan Draper. John Blank, Peter Blank, cox Vaughn Bollen and I were then selected in the SA Penrith Cup LW4+ for the 1961 Australian Championships at Port Adelaide.

The major success season 1961–62 was winning the SARA Championship Senior 8+ coached again by Bryan Draper, followed by Champ Senior 8+ wins in seasons 1962–63, 1963–64, 1964–65, all coached by Bryan.

The photo is of the 1962 Championship senior 8+ crew; (front row) Vaughn Bollen (cox), Bryan Draper (coach) and left to right, Rodney Cornelius stroke, Cliff Graetz 7, Peter Mitchell 6, Ian Russell 5, Doug Vincent 4, Bob Russell 3, Dennis Beck 2, Max Merkenschlager bow.



I was selected in the 1962, 1963 and 1964 SA Kings Cup 8+ held at Ballarat, Brisbane and Penrith respectively. At the 1964 regatta, when the crew arrived at the Penrith Rowing Club on the Nepean River, there was a new timber eight with oars for the SA Kings Cup crew generously donated by Allan Southcott, Patron and President of Torrens. This is an amazing example of the importance and value of the people who loved the sport and generously donated both their time and money to ensure both TRC and SA Rowing remained successful.

I was awarded the SA War Memorial medal for best oarsman under 21 years in the Sport of Rowing in 1962.

A Torrens/AUBC composite crew won Championship Senior 8+ again in season 1966–67, coached by Bill Wallace from Victoria.

I stepped back from senior rowing after that race and assisted with coaching junior and lightweight crews.

Sunday morning rows on the Torrens with the veterans were always enjoyable.

When the West Lakes International Rowing Course was proposed, the initial facilities and buildings were designed by Rob Cheeseman (Cheeseman Doley Architects). The construction documentation was donated by the office I was working for at the time, Woodhead, Hall, McDonald, Shaw Architects, who were granted SARA Foundation Membership for their contribution to the project. The construction was managed and completed under the SA Government initiative to engage unemployed construction workers and tradesmen during a period of downturn in the building industry.

I became the TRC Delegate on the SA Rowing Association around 1970 and continued until the late 1970s. I was SARA Regatta Recorder from 1972 through to the late 1970s. I can remember being the recorder at the 1973 Murray Bridge Interstate and Kings Cup Regatta, and at the 1979 West Lakes Interstate and Kings Cup Regatta. The new AIS head coach, Reinhold Batschi, reorganised that regatta to replicate those in Europe. I was thrown in the deep end having to place crews in the heats, repechages and finals in the correct lanes and in double time with Reinhold breathing down my neck. Australian Rowing President Aitken handed me the process notes and gave me 15 minutes to read, understand and act. Phew!!

The next phase of my rowing career was coaching a group of young girls from non-rowing schools in the mid-eighties who went on as TRC crews to win SARA Championship Schoolgirl U14, and Open coxed fours in 1987 and 1989. A single sculler, Marnie Boylan-Sugg went on to win SARA Championship Schoolgirl 1x in 1989, 1990 and 1991, Australian National Championship Schoolgirl 1x in 1990 and 1991 rowing for St Mary's College and Australian National Championship Youth 4- in 1990 coached by Robyn Grey-Gardiner. Marnie was a twice Australian champion in 1990 at age 15 years.

I had the honour to be nominated and elected as Life Member of TRC in 1987.

I was appointed SARA delegate to the Rowing Australia Board in 1988 to 1990.

I was elected to the TRC Committee and served up to 1989 in various roles, including Secretary and Coaches Representative.

A new Graeme King coxed four was christened 'Ian Russell' in 1988 for the Torrens Women's Junior Four to race at the Penrith National Championship Regatta. Interestingly, the crew first to row the boat after the christening was Ian Russell stroke, Gavin Russell 3, Bob Russell 2, and Craig Russell bow, Natalie Russell cox. The row past was a memorable moment.

Through the seventies, eighties and early nineties, I continued masters rowing with some memorable races with Australian representatives, Bill Dankbaar (1973 Australian M4-) and Vic Gibson (1970 Australian M4+) and David Taylor (TRC Captain in the 1980s) in coxed fours, and coxless pairs with both Vic and David.

Refer to the Memories of Bryan Draper for more information on Bill Dankbaar's life in rowing.

The photo is of a 1988 winning MM4+ at West Lakes with myself as stroke, Bill Dankbaar (3), David Taylor (2) and Vic Gibson (bow).



At the masters Wenworth regatta in 1989, Vic and I won MM2- pair. This was raced in early morning heavy fog and we were in lane 1 with crews for the next races coming up to the start. Vic ensured we jumped the start and moved into the centre lane to avoid an almost inevitable head-on collision. A winning move.

At the same regatta, we won the MM8+ with brother Bob, John Tonkin, Vic, David Taylor and others in the TRC boat against a Banks composite crew with Terry Davies and Brian Vear (Victorian Kings Cup legends). We had a marginal lead after high rating start and then consistently moved away over the 1000m to win. Sitting in the stroke seat, I can vividly remember looking across and seeing my nemesis, Terry Davies, stroke of the Banks 8+, being passed by TRC. Loved it!!!

At the 1993 Australian Masters Championships in Perth, Vic and I won our Division MM2- (photo).

Vic was a member of the winning TRC MM4- at the World Masters Championships at West Lakes 1997 with Michael Lohmeyer, Ian Parr and Neil Taylor.

Vic was originally from Tasmania and had an impressive pedigree with a grandfather and father (as well as Vic) being Australian Rowing representatives. Three generations of Australian blazers in the wardrobe!



Sadly, Vic, David and Bill are no longer with us.

My wife Pam took up competitive rowing in the eighties, rowing sweep 4+, 2- and 8+, coached by me. Our marriage survived the training and racing with a number of successes. Pam won the 1992 SARA Championship WLW4- (with Gina Bell (nee Morris)). Pam then became the last of my immediate family to win a SARA LW4- Championship event, the others being Gavin MLW4-, Natalie WLW4- (AUBC) and myself MLW4+ in 1961.

In November 1992, I was transferred to Darwin with work and in my first week was approached by David Wilson (of the Queensland Kings Cup 8+ in the sixties) to form a crew of past rowers. So developed the Darwin Rowing Club based at the Sadgroves Creek Sailing Club with donated boats from southern clubs stored on outside racks. The membership started with enthusiastic young and older beginners including a group from Darwin University.

We could only row on when the tide was over 5 metres, as the launching area was a mud flat at lower tides. Sadgroves Creek provided a stretch of straight 500metres of protected water in its over 2km length through the mangroves with two croc traps along the way. Rowing on the Darwin Harbour water was out of the question most days, as strong SE trade winds made for un-row-able and dangerous conditions in the dry season. Unfortunately, the wind and tides worked against rowing at convenient times and membership faded away.

However, a decision was made to enter the first ever NT rowing crew in the World Masters Games, Brisbane 1994. We took a boat to Lake Bennett, 80kms down the track and trained for the event over the 1100 metre diameter of the lake (without crocs). The NT Government approved our representation and provided the ochre, white and black racing tops and tracksuits.

We raced on the Wivenhoe dam without success in the NT MM4-. I also raced for TRC in a composite MM4- Mildura/TRC/Port Adelaide crew winning the heat and coming third in the final in rough and windy conditions. The Torrens master's team was present, and I raced coxless pair with Vic Gibson (unplaced) in the red and white hoops.

I returned to Adelaide in Dec 2002 and commenced masters rowing again with the TOMS. Loved rowing with Lui Lippis, the crew skills coach, who set testing exercises and challenges each session.

The TOMS squad morning rows on the Torrens organized by Grant Baldwin were always enjoyable with John Tonkin, Michael Magarey, Bill Carey, Kevin Keough, Grant Baldwin, Graeme Footer, Howard Bone, Jimmy Thompson, Mick Smith, Wilf Otten, Geoff Sugars, cox Tim Carr and others, supplemented with morning ergo sessions and West Lakes training rows.

I was elected TRC President in 2004 following Leigh Chapman's successful term in the Office of President.

I left Adelaide again in 2007 and travelled to Brisbane, joining the Pine Rivers Rowing Club located on Lake Kurwongbah, venue for the 1975 Australian National Rowing Championships. I took up sculling and trained in quads, doubles and singles,

but did not enter competitive masters rowing in QLD. Some older club members, including myself, preferred sweep rowing in 4's and 2's.

Nothing much memorable happened during this time, other than the inevitable capsize and swim experienced by beginners in a single scull.

I returned to Adelaide and the TOMS in 2010 and commenced serious masters training and racing in masters' events. Geoff Sugars commented on my return "more comebacks than General MacArthur".

Highlight medal wins were at the 2014 World Masters Rowing Championships in Ballarat, with gold medals in the MMG8+ and MMH2- with Bill Carey (photo)



I also have medals across multiple Australian Masters Championships.

- 2013, Canberra, MMH2- (silver), MMG4- (bronze),
- 2017, Nagambie, MMG4- club crew medal,
- 2018, Lake Barrington, MMI2- (gold), MMI2x (silver).

Our TRC masters squad always prioritised the importance of racing as club crews in master's events, with composite crews formed only when TRC numbers were insufficient for a full crew.

I left Adelaide yet again in 2019 for Brisbane and the Pine Rivers Rowing Club, continuing serious masters training and racing.

2021 QLD Masters State Championships, Bronze MMH2x, Bronze MixMH2x, Bronze MixMG4x.

In 2021, I was approached by Sunshine Coast RC to form a composite SCRC/PRRC octogenarian quad. Deb White (ex-CEO Rowing SA) and Peter Erskine (both ex-Phoenix RC in SA) are current members of SCRC.

2021 Maryborough Bridge to Bridge 13km time trial winners MMJ4x (SCRC/PRRC).

2021 Head of the Brisbane 9km time trial winners MMJ4x (SCRC/PRRC).

2022 QLD Masters State Champs Silver MixMH2x, Bronze MMH2x, Bronze MMG4x.

2023 QLD Masters State Champs Bronze MMJ2x.

2023 Australian Masters Champs Sydney Bronze MixH2x (as an 80 year old in a 70 year old age group).

Enjoyable moments at that Sydney regatta were watching the TRC masters crews and the TRC members of the composite State Masters crews having so much success and appearances on the medal presentation pontoon. Well done Torrens and SA.

In conclusion, the Torrens Rowing Club has been the consistent sporting influence in my life, and the source of pleasure and satisfaction engendered by the ultimate team sport. Lifelong friendships are formed by this rowing bond.