

Vanishing Footprints, Mike McNamara and Herb Hedemann, Pioneer Australian Ultra Marathon Runners and Adventurers

Author Questions and Answers

How did you find out about these runners and what led to you write the biographies of these two men?

I first came across Mike McNamara and his running exploits in an American running magazine in the 1970's. I was intrigued to find out more about him. This was in the era before computers and the internet, so research wasn't easy. Later, I discovered that Herb Hedemann had also competed in some of the same races, so I decided to try and find out more about both men. As I uncovered more of their lives, I decided their stories were worth telling which led me to researching and writing *Vanishing Footprints*.

What challenges did you face in researching this book?

I had several major challenges in researching this book, the main one being ferreting out information about my two main characters. Both Mike and Herb lived in America for long periods of their lives, so from a biographical perspective getting a clear picture of where they lived, what they did, who they mixed with away from their running was a very difficult task. There are only a few people alive today who met and knew these men. Neither of them had children and very few personal documents were available to help build up an understanding of them.

Why do you think these two athletes achievements were largely unrecognised in Australia?

Because their long-distance running performances were achieved in North America these exploits were not picked up in the Australian sporting press. They competed as professional in an era when "true" sport was still largely amateur, and these events were given less coverage in Australia. Herb was better known in Australia because of his achievements at the Stawell carnival and so he had some "name recognition."

Mike was just completely unknown in Australia and continued to be so even when he returned from America to live back in Queensland. He was christened the "forgotten Australian" by one writer and that's a pretty accurate description.

How did to two runner's personalities compare to one another?

These two men had completely different personalities. Mike was solid, consistent and made of very stern stuff. He was a quite man not given to talking about his achievements. On the other hand, Herb was more extroverted, he could entertain the press and friends with extravagant stories and was not reticent in reminding people about what he had achieved in his running.

What learnings do these two runners have for today? How would these two runners fit into the sports world of today?

Away from the sporting arena, athletes of today are very adept at using social media to build a profile for themselves and their performances. If Mike and Herb were transported to today, Mike would still be a quite type not pushing his achievements. On the other hand, I believe, Herb would be all over social media reminding his followers of his achievements.

What in the biographical genre appeals to you?

Writing biography allows me to find people who are interesting in some way but not necessarily famous in the traditional sense and delve into their lives. That way I can come to know and understand them and explain their actions within the social context of the time.

What could these two runners have done to help develop Australian distance running?

I believe these two runners could have contributed a great deal to developing Australian distance running which had been thwarted by the believe that due to the Australia's climate the country could not produce world class distance runners. Both Mike and Herb had competed with the very best of the long-distance runners of their era, their bank of knowledge and experience was enormous. Herb was keen to become a coach and his knowledge of preparing an athlete for a race and tactical skills would have been a tremendous bonus for Australian distance running.

For a long time up to the 1980's in Australia there was a strong divide between amateur and professional athletes with a runner having to be in one or camp the other. Once an athlete had crossed into the professional world it was

extremely hard for them to obtain coaching roles or to compete as an amateur again. Unfortunately, Herb as a former professional runner never got to demonstrate his coaching skills.

Key themes you hope readers find in your book?

There are a few themes running through this book, like the strict boundaries between professional and amateur sport that existed in Australia and other countries. These days when we hear of the highly well-paid sportspersons it is easy to forget that a real divide existed between the “gentleman” amateur and the “mercenary” professional. Sometimes this divide diminished the true recognition that many professional athletes deserved.

There is also a theme of how in Australia and particularly Queensland it took a long time to come to grips with how the white man came to understand how they could survive and thrive in the country’s climate. This is of course a sub theme within the larger topic of Australia coming to grips with how it needed to evolve and recognise its own culture and define things in from a local climatic and geographic rather than a British one.

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