

Pole vault bug bites



In focus

With Carmel Meyer

Phil Smyth has risen to great heights, literally, since he joined the Pole Vault training group established by Geoff Brayshaw at the start of the 2014/15 season. Phil had previously been encouraged to join MAWA by Vic Quinlan but failed to follow it up.

The childhood pole vault bug was still in his system, however, and when he heard that Mark Jeffrey had offered to run a training course every third Sunday morning for the season- provided there were enough starters, "I joined MAWA straight away."

Phil has been keen on jumps events ever since his high school days when mobs of neighbourhood kids would come to the Smyth's big backyard in Geraldton to practice on the purpose-built high jump and pole vault set-

ups. With a masterful sense of ingenuity, the Smyth's used the longest bits of '4 x 2' they could find and bamboo crossbars. The vaulting poles were made from old dead aloes flowers which grew out of the spiky aloes plants nearby. Phil explains, "This 10 foot long stalks taper towards the top. They have a very hard outer surface and

an inside core like balsa wood. We called them "ally poles". They are very light and strong and we never did break one.' Sandpits beneath the jumps sufficed for landings.

Phil's

determination reaped rewards, with wins in both high jump and pole vault during his final years of high school. Phil's idol in those days was Trevor Bickle from WA who won the Perth Empire games pole vault gold medal in 1962.

Three generations of the Smyth family called Geraldton home. Phil remembers his childhood fondly- '...it was a fantastic place for kids with so much to do and plenty of mischief to get up to.' Phil was intrigued to discover that Barrie Kernaghan had spent a few of his prime athletics years in Geraldton from 1966. 'It turned out that the house he lived in was originally my grandparent's house in Deboulay Street.'

After high school, Phil applied for a cadetship in Surveying with the Dept of Lands and Surveys in Perth but wasn't successful. Instead, they offered him a cadetship in Cartography. Phil says with a smile, '...and after looking it up in the dictionary I accepted!' After having spent 47 years in the Lands Department he left in 2011, fully retiring in 2013. Phil is married with two children and two grandchildren.

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Photo: John Forbes/MetroPhoto Australia

as Phil aims high

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Below is Phil's exciting account of his pole vault journey with MAWA. The gallant battle between Phil and Geoff, two absolute gentlemen, is inspirational.

"I was looking forward to getting started with the training squad and hoped that my body would hold together. Five of us started training but by the end of the season, Geoff, Andrew Brooker and I remained. Geoff and Andrew competed in pole vault at the 2015 nationals bringing home a silver and gold respectively. For the first couple of sessions, we went through the basics in the sand pit and then on grass. Mark would wisely stop us before we overdid it. Even so, it took me a good two weeks after each session to get over shoulder muscle soreness.

By mid-season, we were vaulting over a bar (Bungie) at the main pole vault stand but were yet to officially compete. Geoff and I were both M65 and we could see that the existing State record was quite gettable.

Geoff had first crack at it in the Strive competition setting a new State record of 2.30m. The following week was my turn and I upped the record to 2.35m. At those heights, we had to compete with 12 to 14-year-old girls, which felt a bit embarrassing but we did learn from them. Geoff went to the 2015 nationals and improved again to 2.40m.

For the 2015/16 season, we still practised on random Sunday mornings. It wasn't until the latter part of the season, in Bunbury, that I managed to equal Geoff's mark of 2.40m. A week later in Perth, I cleared 2.50m, which I repeated at the States.

The current season 2016/17 was to be significant because I was turning 70 in December. I nominated for M65 pole vault at the Worlds where I equalled my PB of 2.50m and finished equal seventh place. There was only

a short time left to improve on the State record before going into M70 and I did get it up to 2.55m but only a week later Geoff was back in front with a vault of 2.60m. With only one competition left in M65, I had to have a go but could not improve. Strangely enough, the first meet I went to as M70 under no pressure I had a vault of 2.70m which is now the M70 State record. I have really enjoyed the pole vault experience and I am grateful to Geoff Brayshaw for making it possible. We competed for three seasons in M65 and it is now fitting that we both hold State Records in our own age groups.'

Phil also enjoys the weekly Tuesday evening warm up sessions and jumps coaching provided by Dave Wyatt; 'Under Dave's guidance my M70 triple jump PB is now better than my M65 PB.'

As jumps events are particularly taxing on the body Phil has had his

fair share of injuries. He has suffered Achilles, Calf and Quad injuries all on the left side! Phil admits that most of his injuries resulted from attempting to return to competition/training too soon. 'Another lesson learnt.'

Phil doesn't just sail through the air he sails on the water –his other sporting passion. He currently sails a Hobie16 catamaran at Nedlands Yacht Club. Phil says, 'I started in 1974 in the smaller Hobie 14 winning two national titles in that class.' Phil also enjoys jive/rock and roll dancing once a week for one and a half hours - nonstop. 'This is great cardiac exercise and works most muscles in your body.' Finally, gold prospecting during the winter months - '*...a lot of bushwalking hours are required to be successful.'*

Phil has quite a few targets for this year. To equal the M70 State record (1.27m) for high jump. He recently cleared 1.25m but feels he is '...off the game a bit at the moment.' Phil acknowledges that the high jump record might not last long as the talented Greg Wilson is soon to turn 70. Phil also aims to equal the State record for M70 triple jump (8.82m). His M70 PB is 8.63m. Ever realistic and thoughtful, Phil admits, "*I am a slow runner for my age so I will need to run faster if I am to achieve any of the above.*"

Perhaps of greatest significance to Phil as he remembers those days in his Geraldton backyard is his desire to equal his schooldays pole vault PB of 2.95m. The boy who achieved success through ingenuity, determination and perseverance is still present in the man ... "In our backyard now we have a pecan tree with a limb that is at a similar height and angle to a pole vault plant. Each time I walk past I do a few chin ups or leg raises".