

# ORBOST & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

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## NEWSLETTER No. 134 February 2017

### The ORBOST GIFT — a story of footracing in Orbost (Part 1)

*“I remember watching a footrace on that oval – must have been in the early ‘60s – I think it was called the Orbost Gift,”* a man said to me at the ODHS Show photos exhibition. Later I heard that the Orbost Gift raised funds for building a hospital in Orbost. These two comments sent me on an expedition to find out more. Two Newsletters are the result, this being the first. I hope you find the reading as enjoyable as I found the search.

- Jenni York

#### A BRIEF HISTORY OF FOOTRACING IN VICTORIA

Professional running in Australia began in the gold-mining days when miners raced against each other for the prize or gift of a gold nugget offered by the local publican or mine owner. Races were run over various distances but the main race was over the Sheffield distance of 130 yards.

The Gift distance is believed to have originated from the distance between two local pubs in the English town of Sheffield. This race is run under a handicap system which makes the race very competitive. While the sprint distance of 75 yards was favoured by sprinters, the distance of 130 yards was regarded as a true test for professional sprinters.

In the 1860s, big money began to influence the sport and attracted a wealth of athletic talent. Numerous carnivals and events were established and the oldest professional carnival in Victoria is the **Maryborough Gift**, which celebrated its 155<sup>th</sup> anniversary on New Year's Day, 2016. In April 1878, almost 2000 people watched the running of the first **Stawell Easter Gift**

and as the sport grew, it attracted talented athletes as well as a range of shady characters. By the 1890s, the sport was trying to address this and a controlling body was set up – the **Victorian Athletic League (VAL)**. Originally administered from Stawell, in 1902 a Melbourne office was established and the sport of professional running was promoted, with very popular carnivals being held in Melbourne and throughout the State between November and June each year when the weather was likely to be more favourable. The history of the VAL is very interesting and the Wikipedia entry gives a great synopsis for those interested.

#### FOOTRACING IN ORBOST, 1901 - 1920

I begin this story in 1901. For small rural communities, sports carnivals were engaging and enjoyable social occasions where locals could pit their skill against each other in a variety of events designed for all members of the community. These included footraces, woodchopping, horse and bicycle races as well as such events as **throwing the wicket, kicking the football, throwing the sheaf and stepping the chain**. All ages and both sexes were catered for. Such days often ended with a concert in the evening. Usually the carnivals raised money for worthy local causes.

**In 1901, the ‘Snowy River Mail’ reported that, after discussion, it was decided to set up a committee to oversee the running of a Hospital Sports Day to benefit the Bairnsdale District Hospital (BDH), to be held on the King’s Birthday in November, 1901.**



**ABOVE:** Ten runners and their supporters lining up at a sports day in Orbost, 1890. These sports days at Orbost and at Marlo preceded the Sheffield Handicap races which began in 1901.

Closer to the date, a program of events was published, including the prizes on offer and entries invited for the footrace and woodchop events, as nomination and acceptance fees applied. Entries for other events were taken on the day. The Sports Day would end with a concert in the evening. The **Sheffield Handicap** attracted 39 entries and the Quarter Mile 17.

All results and a report of the Day were published in the '*SRM*' but the footraces are the ones of interest here. There were three footraces held that day: the Novice Handicap (100 yds), the Sheffield Handicap (130 yds) and the 440 yd race. There were cash prizes for all three races but the committee also put their own touch to the rewards. While the Novice race – for runners who had not won more than 20/- in a race – was for cash, the Sheffield Handicap offered £6 and a trophy for First; £1 and a pair of trousers for Second; and £1 for Third. The Quarter Mile offered a medal for First in addition to the cash prize.

A runner named Bryant won all three races. Protests were lodged and when questioned by committee officials, Bryant 'willingly signed a declaration' saying he was a novice. Although the committee was divided, it decided to withhold the prize monies while further investigations were made. The '*SRM*' of Feb. 2 1902 reported that the committee, after considerable trouble, had resolved the scandal of the footraces and had given £12/4/- to Bairnsdale District Hospital. It seems that Bryant, who many at the time said 'showed the qualities of an old hand', was a professional runner 'from across the border' and ran under a false name. Thus **the first race carnival of the new century was marred by scandal** and one can imagine, proved exhausting to the committee who were simply well-intentioned locals, unprepared for the 'shady characters' of the sport. This committee did not organize another event.

TABLE 1 shows the race results of meetings in Orbost and Marlo 1901 – 1914. It is interesting to track the winning runners of the races through the years, many of whom were successful for a number of years. There are numerous easily-recognised local names among them.

### Marlo Sports

Sports meetings were held in Marlo almost every year from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During WW1 when there were no sports held in Orbost, the meetings at Marlo continued to offer a limited opportunity for lovers of footraces to

both compete and to watch.

In **1902**, the only athletic meeting of the year was the Marlo Sports Day, held on New Year's Day, 1902. The footrace program was a Novice Handicap, the Sheffield and a Forced Handicap (130 yards) (see TABLE 1). Other events were a Hurdle race, a Married Men's race and a High Jump.

**1903** again saw the Marlo Sports Day – 'in aid of the Bairnsdale District Hospital' and held on the King's Birthday November 11. The '*SRM*' reported that a 'fair number attended' but that the 'river steamers were too busy getting maize away to run an excursion from Orbost' thus giving an insight into what was involved in a Sports Day at Marlo then, compared to our 15 minute trip by car today. 'All present appeared to have a jolly good time' and £1/1/- was raised for the BDH. The Marlo Sports Day was advertised in **1904** but there were few entries and the Day was cancelled.

### Sports meetings in Orbost

On Jan 26, **1904**, the Orbost Bicycle Club (OBC) Sports were held and interestingly, the program included a Sheffield Handicap footrace. The '*SRM*' reported that 'Nixon led all the way and won by 6 yards.'

**1905** – the '*SRM*' Jan 14 reported a footrace (presumably the Sheffield distance) run between Percy Nixon and E Degarlas with a £10 per side stake. 'The race was over in the first 30 yards. Nixon won by about 5 yards.' The OBC Sports was held on Jan 30 - postponed from Jan 28 because of bad weather - and again included a Sheffield Handicap and other novelty races. The gate takings were £13.

**1906** – splendid weather prevailed on Jan 26 for the OBC Sports and the Sheffield footrace.

**1907** – the OBC Annual Sports was held on Jan 28 at

the Orbst Recreation Reserve with an expanded footrace program offering double the prize money for the Sheffield and a Maiden Handicap (100 yds) and a Quarter Mile Handicap – all footraces being conducted under VAL rules for the first time. The day was a great success with the gate a record. However, the 'SRM' reported that 'the public were disappointed with the performances of the wheelmen' with some races mired in controversy and the Orbst Wheel Race judged 'boring', despite the meeting having attracted some well-known riders. The footraces, by contrast, entertained the crowd and 'during the day, the Orbst Town Band discoursed sweet music, which was an important factor to the enjoyment of everyone.'

In the light of the success of the footraces, on Nov 9 1907, the OBC resolved to change its name to the **Orbst Athletics Club (OAC)** and to hold Annual Sports on Foundation Day (January). The programs offered from then on by this Club's organisers included footraces, bicycle and horse races, woodchop and other novelty events.

In keeping with the resolution made in November 1907, the OAC Annual meetings were held in 1908 and 1909, run under VAL rules with substantial prizes for the Sheffield and the meetings attracted runners from far and wide.

In **1908**, there were place getters from Bairnsdale and Sarsfield, while in **1909**, place-getters came from Bairnsdale, Launceston, Swan Reach and Armadale as well as the locals. This meeting was declared 'a huge success' with the only issue causing some consternation being spectators impeding the work of the judges. There were no Marlo Sports reported for these two years.

Despite the success of the 1909 Sports Day, the OAC did not run a day in 1910. This may have been because of competing carnivals around the district. In the first 10 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were reports in the 'SRM' of sports meetings in Murrungowar, Cann River, Cunninghame and Bruthen as well as annual sports in Bairnsdale. There may also have been some issues with the registering of events and runners with the VAL. Over the next few years, the OAC did not maintain an annual Sports Day and other carnivals, particularly the Marlo Sports Day, stepped in to fill the gaps.

There was a Marlo Sports Day in **1910**, promoted by Mr McD Stewart, the licensee of the Marlo Hotel. Good prizes were on offer and the 'SRM' reported that there were close contests in both heats and finals which 'must have been satisfactory for the handicappers as they had some strange men to deal with.'



**LEFT:** Percy Nixon, winner of the 1904 Sheffield Handicap. He was a keen sportsman and, as this photo shows, he also played football.

In **1911**, the OAC ran an unregistered Sports Carnival on Easter Monday April 17. There were four footraces offered with the prizes for the Sheffield not as high as in previous years but with good prize money for all races. Entries came in from around the district and as far away as Sale, with the high level of interest clearly shown by the number of heats and semi-finals needed. In front of 500-600 people, 'a feature of the pedestrian races was the "straight running" with all doing their best to win.' The gate was £18/8s.

**1912** saw a departure from the usual. Marlo Picnic Sports, promoted by S P Stewart, was advertised for Easter Monday, April 8, with all events being Post Entry, that is, not requiring prior entry and acceptance. On the day, only a small crowd attended as there was a strong SW gale blowing all day with heavy cold rain later, causing some events to be abandoned. Two footraces were completed: the Marlo Handicap over 130 yards and the District Race over 100 yards.

In November **1912**, Orbst Band Sports were held – 'a Grand Sports Meeting in aid of the Orbst Municipal Band' – on Saturday November 9. Entries had to be accompanied by the fee and details of the runner's past 3 performances. The weather was perfect and £26 was raised from the day and the evening concert.

Then on Boxing Day, **1912** the Marlo Sports Day was run, with the footrace program consisting of a Novice handicap, the Marlo Handicap and a Foot Race of 100 yards. The usual water sports events of the Sports Day program were run on New Year's Day, 1913.

Also in **1912**, there was the first mention of a hospital for Orbst. In an article 'A Hospital Wanted', the writer commented that Bairnsdale District Hospital was started with a £5 note donated by a miner leaving the district – Orbst hospital 'just needs a start'. In November, an Annual Hospital Ball was held at the Mechanics Institute in aid of the Orbst Hospital Fund. Committee President T C D Arkins;

Secretary L Ross.

The OAC resumed running a registered Sports meeting in **1913** with a four event footrace program on a new running track on Monday Feb. 3. The weather was very good and the events were well-managed but as it was not a public holiday, not all locals could attend. Once again, entrants came from all over the State with place-getters from as far as Trafalgar and Bendigo, with very good prize money on offer.

In **1914**, the OAC ran a carnival with VAL rules strictly adhered to. The prizes were good, the weather was fine and the gate was £16. M W Colos of Stratford took home the majority of the prize money, winning both the Sprint and the Sheffield. This was the last meeting before WW1 and it is interesting that O Andrews won the Novice race. He was to write a moving letter from Gallipoli, published in the 'SRM' September 10 1915.

#### **1915 - 1920**

Things changed with the advent of the War. The 'SRM' reveals an incredible amount of activity to support the war effort – races, shows, dances, patriotic concerts were all means of raising funds. In **1915**, a Grand Patriotic Carnival which included a procession and sports, was held on Feb 1. There were two footraces. The Novice Handicap (100 yards) with First Prize of a shaving set and Second Prize of a pocket wallet; and the Patriotic Handicap (120 yards) with First Prize of a silver cup and Second Prize of a silver sugar and cream dish (see TABLE 2). Clearly, running for money was no longer the focus and with many young men who would normally have competed now serving overseas, the competitors available would not sustain a big footrace program. This was the situation in Orbost for the duration of the war.

In **1916 and 1917**, the Marlo Athletic Club (MAC) ran a limited program of sports which included one footrace on Boxing Day (see TABLE 2). In **1918** the Annual Boxing Day Sports, named the Patriotic Sports, were scheduled to run on Boxing Day as usual with the water sports events on New Year's Day. These were postponed, and then cancelled – as was the Annual Agricultural Show in March **1919** – because 'the Township and District of Orbost within a radius of 15 miles was declared an infected area under the Influenza Emergency Regulations of 1919.'

In November **1919**, the annual Hospital Ball was held in aid of the Orbost Hospital Fund.

Then, on Boxing Day, there was a Sheffield Handicap included at the Marlo Sports Day with the proceeds going to the Orbost Hospital Fund.

**1920** saw no Sports Day organized in Orbost and the Boxing Day Sports at Marlo included no footraces. Thus the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an almost continuous program of athletic sports in Orbost, Marlo and the surrounding districts. While early events were in aid of the Bairnsdale District Hospital or various local causes, by the end of 1920 as the community recovered from the effects of WW1 and the influenza epidemic, the Orbost Hospital Fund was being supported by both sporting and social functions.

This developed further during the 1920s and beyond – the subject of another Newsletter.



**ABOVE:** Albert Lester Pinch was a champion runner who won many races during the 1910-1914 period. Like many young men of this era, he then served in the First World War. After returning, he resumed running and won again in 1919 at Marlo.

Year	Race (yards)	First – prize	Second- prize	Third - prize	Nom/Acc	Heats	Semis
1901 – Kings B'day Nov 11	Novice H'cap (100)	C Bryant £1 5s	J Gargan 5s	F Nixon	1s6d	2	-
	Sheffield H'cap (130)	C Bryant £6+trophy	F Kingsmill L1	J Robinson L1	4s/3s	3	2
	440 yd Race	C Bryant £2+medal	W Schnacht	L Price	2s6d/1s	-	-
1902 - Marlo Sports Jan 1	Novice H'cap	D Saunders	M Eraphied	-	-	-	-
	Sheffield H'cap	J Grant	L Price	H Nixon	-	2	
	Forced H'cap (130)	J Gargan	M Edlington	J Grant	-	-	-
1903 - Marlo Sports Kings B'day	Novice H'cap	W Read £1	W Scott 10s		2s		
	Marlo H'cap (130)	Jas Gargan £3	W Read £1	A Edlington 10s	3s/1s6d		
	Forced H'cap	T S Kay £1	W Scott 10s				
1904 - OBC Sports Jan 26	Sheffield H'cap	P O Nixon	A Edlington	W J Cameron		2	
1905 - OBC Sports Jan 30	Sheffield H'cap	F Nixon £3	P O Nixon £1	T Martin 10s		2	
1906 - OBC Sports Jan 26	Sheffield H'cap	M W Cowell £3	C Hammond £1	F A Nixon 10s		3	
1907 - OBC Annual Sports Jan 28	Maiden Plate (100)	L King £1	J J Murphy 10s	G De Forest	1s6d	3	
	Sheffield H'cap	M W Cowell £7	H W Hayes £2	W Cooper £1	4s/2s	8	2
	440 yds H'cap	W J Tranter £3	CE Houghen 10s	C Gilbert	2s/1s		
1908 - OAC Annual Sports Jan 27	Maiden Plate	W Bowen £1	J Gargan 10s	W Cameron	1s6d	3	
	Foundation H (130)	M W Cowell £10	W Bowen L2	W F Murray L1	5s/2s	3	2
	220 yd H'cap	M W Cowell £3	DB Reid £1	FB Rankin	2s/1s	7 ran	
1909 - OAC Annual Sports Feb 1	Maiden Plate	A P Mosley £1	T Martin 10s	J Gargan	1s6d	3	1
	Foundation H'cap	J Cowell £10	E T Terry £2	A Biggs £1	5s/2s	3	2
	220 yd H'cap	W F Darcy £3	A Biggs £1	E Biggs	2s/1s	2	
1910 - Marlo Sports Dec 26	Novice Race £2 10s*	A Pinch	A Burns	Lang		3	
	Marlo H'cap £8 10s	Toogood	D Rodwell	Martin		3	
	75 yd Race	D Rodwell	A Pinch			2	
1911 - OAC Easter Carnival April 17	Novice H'cap	H Stagg £2	RP McDonald 10s	D Rodwell		4	2
	Sheffield H'cap	J Nixon £5	AL Pinch £1		3s/1s6d	4	2
	Sprint H'cap (75)	A Morgan £3 10s	A Pinch 10s		2s/1s	3	2
	440 yd H'cap	J Nixon £4	E Biggs £1				
1912 - Marlo Sports April 8	Marlo H'cap	M Cowell	A Cameron**	H Stagg**		2	1
	District Race (100)						
1912 - Orbost Band Sports	Novice £1 5s	J Gargan	E Lynch	J Lynn	1s6d	3	
	Sheffield £4 10s	J Gargan	E Lynch	A Burns	2s/1s		
	1/4 Mile £2 10s	J Nixon	J Beattie				
1912 - Marlo Sports Dec 26	Novice H'cap	P Irvine	A Burns	R Chapman			
	Marlo H'cap	R Chapman	A Burns				
1913 - Marlo Sports Jan 1	Foot Race (100)	A Burns	D Rodwell				
1913 - OAC Reg. Sports Feb 3	Novice H'cap	C Inder £6 10s	W Rennie £1	R Macalister 10s	3s/1s	6	3
	Sheffield	A L Pinch £12	EG Redenbach £2	J A Price	5s/2s	3	1
	Sprint H'cap	A Price £4	C Inder £1	A L Pinch	2s/1s	4	2
	440 yd Race	A L Pinch £5	CE Bergmeier £1		2s/1s		
1913 - Marlo Sports Dec 26	Novice Race	Beattie	Johnston				
	Marlo H'cap	E Lynch	M Cowell	D Price		3	2
1914 - OAC Jan 31	Novice H'cap	O Andrews £5	J Gargan £1 10s	A Boucher 10s	2s/1s6d	2	
	Sheffield	M W Colos £12	A L Pinch £2	J H Nixon	5s/2s6d	3	
	Sprint	M W Colos £5	J Pugh £1 10s	A L Pinch 10s	2s/1s	3	
	440 yd Race	J Pugh £5	J H Nixon £2	A L Pinch £1			

\* the £ amount is the total prize money for the race

\*\* dead heat

**TABLE 1: Race Results 1901—1914**

Year	Race (yards)	First - Prize	Second - Prize	Third - Prize	Nom/ Acc	Heats	Semis
1915 – Feb 1 Patriotic Carnival	Novice H'cap (100)	G King	FH Beattie	A Cameron	2s		
	Patriotic H'cap (120)	FH Beattie	AC Hossack		2s6d	2	
1916 - MAC Boxing Day	Marlo H'cap (120)	V Morris £1 10s	H King 10s		1s6d/1s		
1917 MAC Boxing Day	100 yd Race	W Eccles	R Chapman				
1919 MAC Boxing Day	Sheffield H'cap (130)	A L Pinch	H Napier				

**TABLE 2: Race Results 1915 – 1919**

MAC Marlo Athletic Club; OBC Orbost Bicycle Club; OAC Orbost Athletic Club; VAL Victorian Athletic League

### IMPERIAL MEASURE CONVERSIONS

75 yards = 68.9 metres; 100 yards = 91.4 metres; 120 yards = 109.7 metres;  
130 yards = 119metres; 220 yards = 201 metres; 440 yards = 402 metres.

12 pennies(d) in 1shilling (s or 1/-) and 20 shillings in 1 pound (£).

### WAGES AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20th CENTURY

To understand the relevance of the prize monies offered, it helps to know what the average weekly earnings were.

In 1896 Victorian wages boards set the first minimum wage rates in Australia, but only in the areas of clothing manufacture and bread making eg Bread-making – 1s per hour; The (Men's) Clothing Board – adult males 7/6 per day; adult females 3/4 per day. The Act set an overall minimum wage for any factory or workroom in the colony of Victoria of 2/6 per week.

In 1901, the average annual income in Australia per inhabitant (including children under 15 years) was £46 i.e. less than £1 per week. Housemaids were paid 14 shillings per week, with domestic cooks faring a bit better at 25 shillings per week. It was not uncommon for children to work and young boys employed by newspaper publishers were paid 3 shillings to work 12 hours for six nights per week.

A loaf of bread cost between 2 and 3 pence and eggs were 1/3 per dozen. A man's business shirt cost 8/6 and average weekly rent for a three bedroom house was 13/-. A widowed woman with two children and working as a housemaid could barely afford a house, let alone pay for food or clothes.

Then in 1907 there was an historic wage decision – the Harvester Decision – in which the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration decided that 7/- per day or 42/- per week for an unskilled labourer was 'fair and reasonable wages, having regard to the normal needs of the average employee, regarded as a human being living in a civilized community'. It allowed a man, wife and three children to live in frugal comfort.

To win £10 for running fast was a very attractive option for earning a living, but when the nomination and acceptance fees are taken into account, it was also very risky – if you didn't win, the costs were quite high. The potential for corruption is easy to understand.