



The History of Wemmer Pan Rowing Club



The Golden Years (1960 to 1969)

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(edited by Rod MacKinnon & Charley Lewis)*

Administration

During 1960 and 1961, after much effort, the Pan was restored to its original size by raising the weir. The original structures were demolished and the first phase of the present clubhouse was constructed. The boat house and tank were rebuilt by the Council, and the wooden jetties and clubhouse were funded by members and built by Tommy Pitchers, a senior rower. The second group of boat houses were also constructed by the Council in the later years of the decade. Tommy built the second phase clubhouse extensions in 1969, with Club funds, once the sailing and canoe clubs had expanded and additional space was required. Keith Reid recalls the clubhouse as "The Sheat House" so-named after the Club's Hon. Patron, Mr W Sheat, GM of the Parks Dept.

The old Pan course was 500m, from the north-east to the south-west corners. Trevor and Doug, having watched the Serpentine Sprint in London in 1958, were impressed with the event and proposed the idea for Wemmer. The first Wemmer Sprint was held in 1959 on the old course with races at an unheard-of 10 minutes apart, and with a special enclosure and marquee tent.

The first surveyed course was laid in 1964. In 1965 the discovery of a woman's legs in a suitcase floating in the Pan resulted in it being partially drained in search of the other dismembered remains, so in that year the old course was used for Sprint. The other body parts were eventually found in Zoo Lake and others around the City.



The 1960 Olympic Team, Jack Mok, Trevor Steyn, Stan Patterson, Manager, Dave Lord, Franco Stocchi

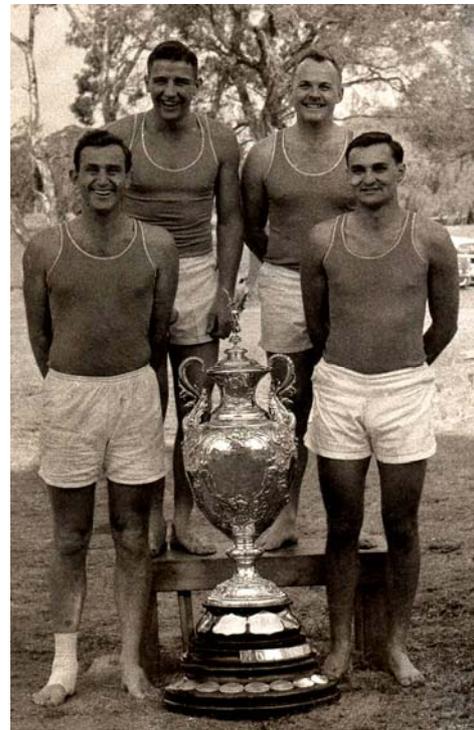
After the 1960 Olympics Jim Rogers lost interest (some say it was on account of 'Rowing Politics') and quite abruptly left rowing. He resigned as Chair in 1962 to return to Australia. He had been a controversial and dictatorial man, but it was he who got the oarsmen to think in international terms. He had also personally invested a great deal into creating structures and processes that resulted in the Olympic achievements of 1960, and had laid the foundations for the Club's success in this

decade. He owned almost all the boats used by the Club and he intended to ship them back to Australia unless the Club could come up with R22 000. At that time a Volkswagen cost less than R1 000, so this was an enormous amount of money. With great difficulty, a short-term loan was obtained from a bank. How to pay it back was the question.

The decision was made to hold the “Wemmercade” as an expansion of the sprint regatta. It included rowing, canoeing, sailing, motorboat racing, parachute jumps and so on. It was an enormous undertaking by the Club members - most of whom were lucky not to lose their jobs due to time spent on the project. It was a great success and a large part of the debt was settled.

Rowing activity on the Pan increased considerably in this decade. The Wits Boat Club and Viking RC moved here in 1962, as their water on the Rand Leases Dam in Florida had silted up. School clubs started at the Pan from the mid-1960s. Members of the Club and some Vikings ‘allocated’ themselves to different schools and encouraged and coached them. Alan Francis, Keith Reid, Trevor Steyn, Richard Starke, Neill Davies and Tom Price were members who became very involved, and played a role in the establishment of rowing as a sport at Parktown, Jeppe and KES.

From the mid-1960s the increase in schoolboy rowers resulted in more races in the regatta programmes. At first this meant they finished by the headlights of cars on the bank! Allan Francis was a driving energy, with Stan Patterson, in getting a group of officials together, setting rules and training them. This formalisation created an increased focus on the technical components of running regattas, and reduced the number of after-dark finishes. Ian Steven and Peter Human took a great interest in coxing and, together with Alan, developed coxing courses that carried through well into the 1970s.



1961 & 62 Grand winners, Pierre Bouvet, Jack Mok, Trevor Steyn, Neill Davies



Keith, Neill & Terry check the trailer in style at Buffalo – having lost a wheel on the way down

In the early years of the decade the Transvaal Canoe Club became an affiliated section of the Club, later becoming the Johannesburg CC. Sailing returned to Wemmer Pan after an absence of over 40 years when the Southern Cross Sailing Club was formed in 1968.

Ironically this growth resulted in the demise of the Sunday all-day picnic tradition. Previously, wives and children all came down with baskets at about noon and there was a communal lunch time. The increased activity meant that additional rules were introduced, with set access times. The sailors

had Sunday afternoons, and being off the water by 12 rather killed the social scene.

On the banks the rowers relied on the support of their partners and spouses, who put years of work into Sprint and club fundraising and social events. At the risk of offending by omission, the many contributions of Margaret Francis, Pam Davies, Carol Pitchers, Adrienne Reid, Penny Bothma, Iris Munton, Stella Steiner, Sheila Price, Inky Steyn and Jennifer Wilkinson are recalled.

Competition

The decade of the 1960s was one of the most eventful and successful in the history of the Wemmer Pan Rowing Club, in competition and also from a development aspect. The Club won the SA Championships Eights for nine consecutive years from 1960, and the coxless fours from 1959 to 1967, except for 1964.



1965 season's silverware, the Silver Sculls won by Kurt Hipper, the Grand and local and national titles

The momentum carried forward from the late fifties and opened with the 1959 coxless four of Trevor Steyn, Franco Stocci, Jack Mok and Dave Lord qualifying to represent SA at the 1960 Rome Olympics. Stan Patterson, also a Club member of many years' standing, was the Team Manager. While overseas Stan was accredited as an International Umpire, the first in South Africa.

In 1958 Jim Rogers had sponsored an Australian sculler, Stuart Mackenzie (Melbourne '56 Sculls Silver, London '58 1x Gold and 2x Silver) to come for training before the Rome Olympics and he trained with the Wemmer squad at Billabong. All members were encouraged to join in and this increased the number of rowers who participated in proper training. Many weekends were spent there, sleeping in the Billiard Room floor in sleeping bags - except for Franco Stocchi who brought his own double mattress on the top of his car. The result of this intensive training was a clean sweep at the Buffalo Regatta and at the SA Champs for Wemmer (rowing as Transvaal).

In 1961/2 the coxless four with Pierre Bovet, Robin Herbst, Neill Davies (replacing the retired Dave Lord) and Franco Stocci continued its dominance. They were unbeaten until losing to Wits in 1963 and the German Tourists in 1964. But by that time the Club had won the "Grand" four consecutive times - a feat last achieved by Leander RC from 1908 to 1911.

The successes attracted a spate of experienced new members to add to the very successful Novices and Juniors developed by the Club.

Among the new members were: Kurt Hipper, who had represented Germany in the double-sculls at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics; Dave Huggins, an English international; Richard Wilkinson, Neill Davies and Terry Hageman, who had rowed for Leander and had all won SA junior titles; Mike Murray, a single sculls champion from Durban; Derrick Read and Herbie Freecks from Wits; Richard Starke from UCT; Ray Cox from Alfreds; John Bothma from Rhodes; Jurgen Schoenitz, a German rower and possibly one of the finest coxswains; Vic Howell from Leander and the then Rhodesia; Ian Kerr, Robin Herbst, Colin Plumbridge; and so the list goes on. The result was that Wemmer could field more than one crew in most of the Senior events. As an example of the depth, for the two crews representing Transvaal in an eights challenge against the SA Universities at the 1963 Inter-iversity Regatta, fourteen members came from Wemmer.



1964 Wemmer beaten by the German Olympic squad by 2 feet at the SA Games at Eligwa

In 1964 a German Olympic squad of five competed in SA regattas as part of their preparations, going on to win Gold in the coxless fours at Tokyo later in the year. They had been coached by the legendary Karl Adam and won all the events here. However, Wemmer pushed them in several races, and at the SA Championships lost by just two feet in the coxless fours. In this year Mike Murray won the Silver Sculls, breaking the Club's drought since Dave Cadle in 19'47. The following year Kurt Hipper repeated the feat.

Also in 1964 the first composite national squad was chosen to represent SA in the coxless fours at the Olympics. The crew consisted of three Wemmer oarsmen, Jack Mok, Keith Reid and Neill Davies, together with the Wits stroke, Humphry Nicolls, and Wits's Tony Tasker as spare man. However, on 26 June 1964 South Africa was expelled from the Olympic movement - it was to be 30 years before SA would be readmitted.

From 1965 Wemmer continued on its winning ways and again won the 'Grand'. The crew of Terry Hageman, Jack Mok, Keith Reid and Richard Wilkinson, together with a strong club, swept all before them. This was the first 'Grand' win of another 4-year winning streak through to 1968. When Richard left for Durban and Terry stopped rowing to qualify in his business, Jack Mok and Keith Reid were joined by two Mondeor schoolboys, Donald Jeffrey and Wally Jones, to again take the Grand in 1966.

1967 saw the first Wemmer women's crew since the War, stroked by Alison Read, win an event at SA Champs.

In 1968 a Wemmer crew, comprising Derrick Read, Tom Price, Rob Ayling and the evergreen Jack Mok, was earmarked to represent SA at the Mexico Olympics in what proved to be the vain hope that South Africa would be readmitted.



The '65 Grand crew, Terry Hageman, Jack Mok, Keith Reid, Richard Wilkinson

At the 1968 Wemmer Sprint Regatta, Wemmer fielded two crews in the senior eights. The second crew was made up of recently retired Wemmer oarsmen, who won the sprint event by centimetres from the Wemmer A and Wits, who both complained that the winners had taken two strokes before the 'Row!!!' command came from the starter. The experienced winners of course claimed that it was the speed of their blade work in the start that gave this impression!

In 1968 the South African Rowing Union was created the Tridents Rowing Club to overcome sanctions and provide an opportunity for SA oarsmen to compete overseas. The oarsmen were moved from clubs and trained and competed as a separate club.



Jack Mok and Keith Reid with the ex-Mondeor rowers Donald Jeffry and Wally Jones, preparing after the 1966 Grand win for Henley

Mike Mahon, Jack Mok, Ray Cox, Terry Munton and Paul Diener of Wemmer made the selection to the 8-man squad. In the first year of Tridents the Wemmer crew of Derrick Read, Peter Gush, Dave Cope and Herbie Freecks performed admirably against them, but it became a case of amateurs against professionals. Club senior rowing struggled after the introduction of this system.

When recalling the history at Wemmer over this period, the contribution of two members stands out: that of Trevor Steyn, Springbok, Captain from 1957 to 1958 and again from 1963 to 19'65, a brilliant leader, rower, steersman and coach; the other being that of Jack Mok.

It is no coincidence that the most successful crews at Wemmer in the sixties had Jack in the No 3 seat. He was an exceptional athlete: he had won a national amateur boxing title; had run the mile in under 4 minutes 20 seconds; and was undoubtedly the finest oarsman ever to have rowed for Wemmer – and South Africa - up to the modern era. Jack's favourite comment when passing through the halfway mark was "It is now downhill". He put many a competitor off by eating a huge hamburger just before taking the water for a race.



Another use for a Beetle! Imaginative advertising for Lindsay Saker, where Kurt and Neill both worked

The authors of this 'chapter' note that it was a privilege to be a member of Wemmer in the 1960s, not only because of successes in rowing terms, but because of the camaraderie, attitude and quality of so many members who have become lifelong friends.

