

## **Brian Nettleton by Lisa O'Leary and Stewart Dickinson**

Brian's childhood in England was very unusual in that he didn't attend primary school. Tragically, he was one of the many children of the 1930s/40s era who contracted polio; and of course at that time immunisation was not available. However this gave Brian many remarkable opportunities. One of these was to explore as many books and novels and readings as possible. The local mobile library would visit him at home and he would choose from a diverse and eclectic range of novels, history books and books on sport. After nearly two years of being restricted to bed, he gained his walking back and began to explore, unhindered and unaccompanied, the Yorkshire moors. He would often say his love of the outdoors began during these rambles when he would try to live off the land by eating wild berries and catching and cooking rabbits.

Following his arrival in Australia with his wife Sybil and their 4 children, Brian began working for the National Fitness Council. During this time he became involved in organizing adventure activities for children all over Victoria. He began to see how important it was for children to engage in adventure seeking activities. He worked with children from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds, physical capacities and intellectual capacities, and realised that all children not only needed, but craved adventure, especially adventures in the outdoors.

He explored many of the wilder parts of Victoria. One of these places was Wilson's Promontory. Now, Wilson's Prom is a popular tourist destination and many of the walks and sights are well known to tourists. However in Brian's day these were relatively untouched, and usually unheard of. Brian climbed and peaked the three highest mountains at Wilson's Prom in one day! This is not allowed these days as most of these areas are protected.

Brian then became a Lecturer at the University of Melbourne in the Department of Physical Education. Here Brian's interest in research blossomed. His passion for understanding what it is that makes our human bodies so precise and incredible led him to endless hours of research, investigating theories, interviewing athletes, coaches and laypersons. His understanding of skill acquisition was astounding. Brian wrote many papers on skill acquisition and went on to coach numerous football, tennis and swimming coaches, including the likes of Ron Barassi. He was an acclaimed expert in sports coaching and motor learning, consultant to the Australian Sports Commission and author of the Australian coaching bible of the 1980s: "You're the Coach: An Introduction to Coaching".

Through his university work, Brian continued taking students on outdoor adventures and pioneered the learning of outdoor skills in the classroom and swimming pool, prior to venturing outside. Brian had the ability to look at the motor skills involved and invent ingenious ways of improving them. His techniques were unusual but highly effective. He would use his family and friends in his experiments, leading members of his family to say things like, "We can never go on a canoe trip without Dad's never-ending questions and investigations!" On a visit to the Dickinson's home just prior to a ski trip he strapped 12-inch rulers to the Dickinson children's feet. After the initial clumsiness wore off they were able to safely move about the house, which of course transferred positively to moving about on the slopes.

Brian was an eccentric man. It was always amusing to go outdoors with Brian as he continued to use the old gear he brought over with him from England, including an ancient anorak and a canvas tent. He and Stewart Dickinson often left home at 3.00am on a winter's morning to drive to Mt

Bogong and climb the ice gullies before the sun made it dangerous. On these trips, over a brew on the summit, they would wonder at the power of nature experiences in eliciting positive emotions. These and many other excursions led to researching the measurement of emotions in outdoor settings. This was ground breaking research back in the 1980s and subsequently led to Stewart's doctoral thesis, which was supervised by Brian. Brian was fascinated by the question of what it takes to turn people on, to engage their sense of adventure, especially in nature.

Through their research on exercise in nature, Brian and Stewart were asked to design a bicycle track for the "multifunction polis": an idea to create a uniquely integrated city in Australia. Brian led the program but unfortunately the concept was abandoned; however, Bicycle Victoria used some of the ideas in its urban bicycle track planning.

When the Department of Physical Education at the University of Melbourne closed in the 1980s, Brian was asked to join the Faculty of Architecture. In the space of 9 months he read over 200 books in his new area thus providing him with the knowledge to teach research methods to architecture and environmental planning students. His course proved to be extremely popular because of his dynamic and innovative teaching methods.

Brian continued to take part in outdoor activities despite the continual hip problems which plagued him throughout his life. He would sleep with a hot water bottle on his hip in order to climb or ski the next day. As a result he valued and researched the "power of the mind" long before it became trendy or new age or modern. He read many books on the power of Zen and deeply understood how someone's mind could be trained to better manage pain, throw a javelin, run a 100m race, or traverse a mountain.

Brian had a very well-developed sense of place. He believed place helped a person feel at home, at peace, as well as honouring those who had gone before. He wrote a booklet called "Outdoor Adventures in a City Setting" focused on Melbourne in order to share his knowledge. His favourite spot was Warrandyte and the Yarra river. Warrandyte was a magical and special place for him and his family. He would often talk to his children about how this place held the memories of those who had lived and lost their lives during the gold rush era and the Aboriginal people who had done the same for ages before that. As a person who loved the water he swam most sections of the Yarra and had an intimate knowledge of the river and its ecosystems. He argued strongly that it is important to get to know a certain area in order to feel more a part of it and of nature.

Just prior to Brian's health problems he and Stewart were working on two books. One a book to promote ideas to foster a love of nature for children; the other a book to help explain the effects of outdoor experiences outlining the latest research findings. Hopefully these books will come to fruition in the future. They speak to Brian's legacy in outdoor education.