

Kevin Bell learnt to ski as a 32 year old when he was on holiday in Queensland in 1958.

Within 5 years he was competing in tournaments, was a Foundation Member of the Geelong Water Ski club and had built the clubhouse at Geelong. His favourite event was slalom. He was a competent tricker and usually earned plenty of style points in jump. The judges particularly liked his form in the air.



Victorian team. Left to right. Guy Carlton, Grant Shorland, Rohan Shorland Kevin Bell, Goff Taylor Ken Margan. Sitting in the middle is Ted Hopkins

He also tried his hand at ski racing (as a driver) and had a very short stint as a bare-footer.

He didn't try kite -flying (which was popular in Geelong) but was happy to drive for others including his son Rod.

He was still doing dry starts at 78 years old and continued to ski into his 80's although he admits that by then he had started to use a drop ski.

- Foundation Members included:-
- Brian Roydhouse Vice President 1963.

Kevin Bell

- Don Roydhouse Vice President 1965 and 1966
- Goff Taylor The first President
- Kevin Bell Committee man 1961, Vice President 1962 and President 1963 and 1964.
- Ross Burnside The first secretary
- Brian and John Backwell. Brian was the first Vice President.
- David Alexander
- Leo McCusker

The first club meeting was at the Geelong Car Club rooms in McCurdy Road in 1961.

The club was formed so as to become a formal group that could keep skiing on the Rowing Mile, up to the Queens Park Bridge.

Other early members included:-

- Guy Carlton
- Frank Swain
- Steve Kittelty
- John Barrett
- Bob Appleton a WW2 sub mariner.
- Derek Esler
- Ian and Russell Morris
- Geoff Fulton

Boats were launched by pushing the trailer over the grassy river banks. It was only later on that the luxury of the slip way in Newtown at the end of Fyans Street came available.

The narrow and sheltered section of the Barwon River at Newtown was really popular with trick and barefoot skiers.

Soon it became clear that the skiers were going to have to move as the residents just weren't happy with the noise of the boats.

Goff Taylor found the stretch of the Barwon River at the end of Wilsons Road in Whittington. After a while he told the others. There were no buildings nearby and

Kevin Bell

no neighbours to get upset. Fishermen had made a rough boat slipway and the skiers launched their boats there too.

To start with the club members tried unsuccessfully to buy some land from the farmers.

Eventually Leo McCusker and Kevin Bell caught one of the farmers, Mr Guy Raymond, at a good time and he agreed to sell the river side block of land at the end of Wilsons Road. Kevin thought the original area was about 5 acres and that there is possibly some truth in the myth that a bottle of whiskey had a significant influence in sealing the deal. Guy Raymond also owned the St Albans Stud (further up Wilsons Road) where Pharlap was stabled and trained prior to the Melbourne Cup.

Kevin's business supplied the material and built the clubhouse soon after the land was acquired. Probably in 1962/3.

The original building was just the upstairs room on stilts. Its height was to keep it above the floods. In the last 50 odd years the floodwaters have come close but have never reached to top floor.

Tournaments continued to be held on the Rowing Mile in town. This was to cater for the large crowds that came to watch. Water skiing was still a relative novelty and crowds always came to watch.



Kaye Thurlow, Rosemary Margan, Kevin Bell and Goff Taylor at Moomba

During one of the tournaments the ski boat came to the bank to pick up Colin Faulkner who was the next skier. When the engine was restarted the engine box was blown off when spilt petrol ignited. Guy Carlton was the boat judge and in the style of the day he was sitting on the engine box and was blown clear out of the boat, across a small stretch of water onto the bank. He was uninjured. The driver Goff Taylor in t-shirt and shorts was less lucky as he received severe burns.

Kevin remembers that this was a Seacraft inboard boat. (Ian Faulkner remembers the boat as a Duffin clinker built boat owned by Les Wilson). Typically though at that time, people had clinker fibreglass hulled boats with 40 horse power outboard motors. Soon 75hp motors came available.

There were usually good entries to the tournaments and great excitement when internationals came. Chuck Stearns USA, Jimmy "Flea" Jackson USA, Deidre Barnard South Africa, Bruno Zaccardi Italy, Tito Antunano Mexico and Vaughan Bullivant New Zealand all came to Geelong in the 1960's.

Kevin Bell

The Americans in particular were well ahead of the Australians and they were great to watch.

The early Geelong tournament skiers were:-

Kevin Bell Victorian overall and Australian and Moomba senior slalom champion.

Goff Taylor

John Backwell. John came 3<sup>rd</sup> in the Victorian Championships in 1964 (Lake Boga) and 1965 (Geelong). In fact he was the top placed Victorian both years. Interstate skiers could claim Victorian Championships then.

Bob Appleton who was known as a mad jumper

Guy and Jane Carlton

Don and Doug Roydhouse. Doug was president of the Melbourne University Water Ski Club.

Austin and Murray Swain

Rod Bell, 4 times Australian University Water Ski Champion

Rules and equipment for water skiing tournaments were similar to today but there were some significant differences.

- 2 handles for slalom and flat bottomed skis.
- Promotion to the 6 foot jump with a really low rating.
- Form points for jump
- Ride-out points for trick runs when a skier stood up his run.
- 38mph slalom top speed.

The large crowds were often entertained with ski show acts between events.

Even with the smaller engine boats they managed to pull a team of 5 girls carrying flags. The skiers were Jane Carlton, Peg Roydhouse, Isabelle McCusker, Jean Backwell and Jan Sprague.

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The most successful stunt was all about the “Newspaper Cameraman”. This guy was on the jump so as to take photos of the ski show. They left him there when the jump event started. The commentator got really panicky and drew the attention of the crowd to the dangerous situation. But the cameraman wouldn’t move. The police panicked too and tried to stop the first jumper. The jumper hit the ramp and the “Cameraman” dived off the ramp. Now there was a new problem. His “Camera” had sunk and he started to dive for it and asked for help from others. At this point the only way to make the police happy was to admit it was all a stunt and that all reasonable safety precautions had been taken and no real camera was lost. The crowd loved it.

Other tournaments sites in the 1960’s included:-

Latrobe,

Bridgewater Lake near Portland,

Lake Fyans near Stawell

Deniliquin

Bridgewater

Lake Boga

The Yarra River for Moomba.



Presentation night- 60s style.

Water Skiing has always been a family sport, the same surnames appear time and again. For instance Rod Bell and Austin Swain are still skiing and are the sons of early members.

Members form friendships which often extend beyond water-skiing. When Kevin Bell took to sailing Don Roydhouse, a WW2 bomber command navigator, joined him as navigator on his ocean going racing yachts. Kevin continued to skipper his own yachts until he was 86. By that time he had logged 55,000 nautical miles, won line honours in the Melbourne to Devonport several times, competed in three Sydney to Hobarts (best place 28<sup>th</sup>), eight Melbourne to Hobarts, two Sydney to Noumea races as well as cruised the South Pacific and visited New Zealand, Tonga and American Samoa. At 85 he won the Geelong Yacht Club Division 2 Championship.

Back to water-skiing. In 1962 the Australian Water Sportsman magazine reported on the Moomba Masters :-

“...the organisers went ahead with the Senior Men’s Slalom event and this was won in grand style by Kevin Bell, of Geelong, with 37 points. Kevin fresh from his

Kevin Bell

success at the Victorian Championships the previous week stamped himself as perhaps the best slalom skier in this division in Australia”.

Good on you Kevin.

The Geelong Water Ski Club Clubhouse was named after Kevin Bell. The naming ceremony was part of the club’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations in December 2021.

Kevin’s son Rod Bell accepted a memorial plaque on behalf of his family. Rod looked up the Bell and Fulton archives and found that the clubhouse was built between February and October 1967 at a total cost of \$2996.53.