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Pascoe Vale, Victoria, 3044
Monday 4th December 2023

Hello everyone

As Christmas 2023 quickly approaches, it is time to put fingers to keyboard and reflect on the year past.

The world continues to struggle with the aftermath of covid and it is only in the last 12 months that I have started to catch up more regularly with old friends and travel more. With a new covid variant now being advertised, it is indeed a different world in which we find ourselves.

It is a little over 3 years since Lois's passing but she remains front and centre in our thoughts and we remember her in all our various functions.

I continue my active retirement (15 years now), finding the time to do lots of bike riding, along with reading, racewalk officiating, the occasional bushwalk and lots of gardening on the home, church and other fronts.

My year got underway with 4 weeks in NSW, helping Australian Walks Coach Brent Vallance in his yearly summer racewalking camp. With one week spent at the AIS in Canberra, followed by 3 weeks in Perisher Valley in the NSW Alps, my role included driving the vans, helping with training, looking after athletes' needs, etc, etc, I was kept busy enough but thankfully not too busy! The camp was a huge one, with nearly 60 walkers and staff in attendance, with the theme being "Live High, Train High". With Perisher at 1700m altitude, it was obviously a high altitude camp, with lots of testing and dietary related studies taking place. I did avail myself of the occasional bike ride in the mountains!

Organising the Coburg 24 Hour Carnival has been one of my biggest commitments for many years now. The 2023 edition was our largest yet, with a huge field descending on the Harold Stevens Athletic Track for the mid April staging. It was a very challenging event this year, with heavy rain for most of the weekend. But ultra runners and walkers are a tough bunch and most soldiered through. Little did we realise that it would in fact be our last Coburg 24H. I had opened up the website for 2024 and we had already taken 15 early bird entries when we were told by the ultra governing body in October that the track was too old and would no longer be certified for the event. After a period of fruitless discussion, we sadly decided to pull the plug and close the event. It was a tough call, given the event has been held at Coburg yearly since 1988, but one that was forced on us by the intransigent attitude and rigid rules stance taken by the higher up administrators. I have very mixed feelings. While it will be nice to get that time back for other matters, it is a great shame for those many athletes for whom this was always a must-do event.

I continue to enjoy my bike riding and participated in a couple of the tougher events again this year – the Alpine Classic (135km) in late January and the Otway Classic (145km) in April. Around 140km is my comfort limit – any further is a bit problematic for me! The Alpine Classic course included a climb of Mt Hotham, one of the toughest climbs I have done. Not for the fainthearted.

Like in 2022, I headed off to Europe in late July 2023 for 3 weeks of cycling with old walking mate Harold van Beek, who lives in Luxembourg. He had a bike ready for me and all I had to do was bring my bike shoes, helmet and riding gear. We spent the first week riding around Luxembourg, the second week in the Dolomites in northern Italy and the third week back in Luxembourg. In 2022 it was the French Alps and this time around saw us investigating new terrains. The Stelvio Pass had been on my bucket list for quite some time so this was the ideal time to tick it off.

We based ourselves in a little skiing village near the Italian city of Bormio. From there we were within striking distance of three of the monsters of the Giro d'Italia – the Passo del Stelvio (2757m), the Passo di Gavia (2618m) and the Mortirolo (1852m). We also threw in Cancano (1938m) for good measure, to take our tally to 4 huge climbs. We could have easily stayed another week and done more climbs but one week of that sort of riding was sufficient for me.

- **Passo del Stelvio**

The climb from Bormio is 20.8km and bridges 1532 vertical metres with an average gradient of 7.4%. It tops out at 2757m above sea level, making it one of the highest passes in Europe. It's hard to put in words how monumental this ride is. It's unrelentingly steep on the way up and frighteningly steep on the way back down. Perhaps the only way to truly appreciate its scope is to ride back down. I was absolutely spent when I finished.

- **Passo di Gavia**

Another monster ride. The full ride from Bormio to Passo di Gavia is 24.8km long and climbs 1396m with an average gradient of 5.6% (but is a lot steeper in places). It tops out slightly lower than Stelvio but still a whopping 2618m above sea level. Again, lots of switchbacks and a daunting ride back down.

- **Mortirolo**

- Perhaps not as well known as the Stelvio and the Gavia but definitely the third of the big 3. The way we rode (from Gavia) was the easier climb, only 12.8km at an average gradient of 10.8% and topping out at an altitude of "only" 1852m.

- **Lago di Cancano**

- We also took in the climb from Bormio to Cancano, advertised as an easier day to mix in between the big climbs. Yeah sure – still a 13.2km climb to an altitude of 1938m with a spectacular ladder of over 30 switchbacks.

I've included a few photos on our 2023 Christmas website (see link below). Also, you can read more about these climbs at link <https://humancyclist.wordpress.com/2017/07/30/cycling-stelvio-and-the-dolomites/#:~:text=Length%2017.3km%20%7C%20Average%20gradient,given%20the%20benign%20first%204kms>.

This was definitely the highlight of my year, just as my cycling sojourn to France was in 2022. I can't thank Harold and Fernande enough for their hospitality and friendship. I'm the weak link when riding with Harold but he puts up with my slower pace with uniformly good humour.

And of course, my local rides around Melbourne would be much less enjoyable without the company of Brian and Richard. And I even get to test myself out against Andrew Jachno when I get to Canberra or he gets to Melbourne. So I am blessed with an abundance of good friends and good riding partners.

What's on offer next year? Well, Harold is willing if I am and I haven't ridden in the Spanish Pyrenees yet. Who knows! But first, I had to tick off one major piece of surgery. I had a left hip replacement way back in 2005 (and its still going great guns) and the time had finally come for the right hip to be addressed. I went under the knife on Wed 29th November and was back home in by the morning of Saturday 2nd December. Now for a very quiet few months on the home front. But I have warned Brian that the reprieve is only temporary – I'll be back!

I managed to fit a lot of interstate travel this year – Canberra and Perisher Valley (NSW) in January, Canberra in March, Brisbane and then Canberra in June and Adelaide in October. I will finish off the year with a week with our family in Darwin in December. It is so nice to be out and about after Covid!

I continue to keep myself busy at the St Linus Anglican Church and on the Parents Advisory Committee of the St Linus Kindergarten, two activities which Lois undertook for many years and which I continue in her absence. There is always something to be done, whether it be odd jobs or gardening or such like, but it is enjoyable and satisfying work.

You may remember from last year's newsletter that the St Linus kindergarten was in the middle of a \$500,000 major refurbishment. That work extended into 2023 and the move back into the newly refurbished hall finally took place over the Easter School holidays. I was one of a number who breathed a sigh of relief when that box was finally ticked.

And now onto news of the local family.

David is now into his eleventh year working with the State Revenue Office, the Victorian government's main taxation agency. He continues in his IT role, coordinating new project designs and keeping the developers and testers on the straight and narrow. In the post-covid world, he works from his home office for 2-3 days per week and only travels into his city based office when he has to.

Chris is just coming to the end of his fourth year as a fireman with Fire Rescue Victoria and has spent the second half of this year stationed at the South Melbourne Fire Station. As per the fireman's life, he works 2 day shifts, followed by 2 night shifts, then has 4 days off. Suffice to say he gets his share of fires and call outs. He has recently

finished some certification training on the high ladders and will soon shift to the Windsor Station, which boasts one of these ladder trucks.

Chris and Amie look after Ollie and Annie every second week, so I come to the fore when Chris's workdays clash with his family days, and on those occasions I take the kids to and from school, give them dinner and often have them sleeping over here at Avoca Crescent. These are wonderful times and I feel so lucky to have such an active role in their formative years – Ollie, who is now 12, will graduate from primary school this year and will start in Year 7 at Northcote Secondary College in 2024. Annie is now 10 and will commence Grade 6 next year. Exciting times!

Ollie continued with his field hockey this winter, still part of the Essendon Hockey Club U12 team but now one of the more experienced players in the team. He continued to hone his skills as a goalie and his team did well in what was a very tough competition, just missing out on the finals on percentage. He has now moved onto cricket season, playing in an U12 team in the local competition and working on his cricket skills. Annie has opted for netball and is enjoying herself in that sport, with matches most Saturday mornings. She also does tennis and drawing/art classes, so has a wide repertoire of activities.

Paul continues in his role as the National Secretary of the Australian Labor Party and is still living in Canberra. In fact, this year saw him move from the rental market and buy his own home there. That is fantastic news!

With Labor in Government now, he has lots to do in what is one of the most senior positions in the party. In this context, it was perhaps not a surprise when the Financial Review named him number 3 on the list of the *10 Most Covertly Powerful People in Australia for 2022*. He made the top 10 list again in 2023, an indication of the continuing influence he brings to bear in his role. Needless to say, we are immensely proud of his achievements.

As the music scene switched up a notch this year, Matt was busy with music festivals and gigs far and wide. It was great to see him back in business. He continues to play with a variety of artists, the mainstay being Ajak Kwai, and he normally plays one or other type of guitar. He continues with his music teaching at a couple of local schools and is just about full time when he adds up his total hours. Adding it all together, it makes for a very busy lifestyle.

On a personal note, it is wonderful to have Matt still sharing the house with me.

With three of the boys living locally, we often meet up for shared dinners – Dave, Chris, Amie, Ollie, Annie, Matt and Jess. We think of Paul on such occasions as he works away in Canberra. On the occasions when we do have Paul down, they are opportunities for even greater celebration.

Our wider family is also going well.

My eldest brother Mick has sold his dairy farm and will soon (once his house build is finished) be living with son Andrew on his farm outside Cobram. That way, Mike can work as much or as little as he wants on Andrew's farm without the hassle of being chief cook and bottle washer. I popped up to see him just before he said goodbye to his old farm in Yarroweyah.

The family of my late brother Terry in Darwin is also doing well. Diana has done 2 overseas trips this year, both with her sisters. The first, in May, was to Israel and Egypt, and the second, just completed recently, was to Portugal, Spain, Italy and France, following the Pilgrimage circuit.

Also on the Darwin front, our nephew Tom and his partner Arianna became first time parents in July, with Leona Florence Erickson coming into the world on 24th of that month, weighing in at 3.275kg. It is always exciting to welcome new members to our family.

1 Avoca Crescent Pascoe Vale continues to host its usual wide ranging list of guests. Early in the year, I played host to overseas walkers Anette (Hungary, Perseus (Sweden) and Ennie (Finland) who were all over for some summer training. Then Christer (Sweden) stayed here when he came across for our Coburg 24 Hour Carnival in April. And of course, there were lots of interstateers across the year. It's one of the advantages of having a large house with lots of spare capacity.

I have searched the computer and put together my usual Christmas webpage with a selection of family related photos (see <http://www.erickson.id.au/erickson/2023.shtml>). As you can see, we are still here and kicking against whatever life throws at us.

To all our friends, local and remote, we wish you a Christmas filled with peace and joy and hope that 2024 will be a year where the world moves closer together in unity, tolerance and mutual love and acceptance.....

Tim