

# Lonely, late nights



Like other MAWA members with young children, Rob Nichols has his work cut out finding time to train and meet the needs of family and career. However a priority for him is enabling his children to experience the fun of athletics at a young age and it was a treat to see the whole family at UWA Little Athletics sign up morning. Rob, his wife Tracey, six-year-old son clutching his new athletics singlet and four-year-old daughter resplendent in frilly princess dress. After the formalities were finished the kids had a run on the track; delight on their faces to be a runner like their dad.

Perth born and raised, athletics was not at all on Rob's radar until his early thirties when he entered the City to Surf with the ambition of beating a mate's time from the previous year. Beat it he did, by eighteen minutes! And so a seed was sown and Rob joined the Marathon club. Involvement with MAWA came about five years later when a casual chat with someone about track running led Rob to the Thursday night competition at ECAC. He has been a member ever since.

Rob says he owes a lot to MAWA, not least the improvement in his road running. He is confident this improvement has come about due to regular distance competition on the track. In fact, Rob firmly believes that road runners should take the opportunity to run more on the track because *"... it's a brilliant way to improve your speed."* Rob says that in his experience, running 1500m to 5000m races or time trials is a great way to improve finish times in the 10k and half marathon, as well as providing a bit of training variety.

Regular attendance at AWA Strive competitions has been the norm for Rob as well. He enjoys the high standard of competition and pitting himself against young and seemingly fearless athletes. Tongue-in-cheek Rob says, *"If you can handle mentally getting towelled up by some 14 year old who can smash out consistent three-minute kilometres then it's well worth doing."* Strive competitions also provide about the only opportunity Rob has to run the 3000m steeple with 91.4cm barriers. *'It's usually the last event on the programme and I've had some lonely nights with, at most, one or two others running through water in front of a crowd of about sixteen people (all officials) because everyone else has gone home. I'm told it does wonders for your character!'*

Like many committed distance runners, Rob has a marathon in his sights for sometime in the next few years. Over the track season, he generally trains for the 5000m and the steeplechase and over winter he does a lot more races between 10km and the half marathon. For the last few years, he's had the target of going under 16 minutes in the 5k and 10 minutes in the steeplechase. He has come within about 10 seconds of both, but feels (with '...alas...' added for emphasis) that he's getting to the age where it's getting hard to see where any improvement is going to come from. Consequently, he says he is getting more comfortable with the notion of being happy to equal his times from last season. *"I've always seen distance running as ultimately a race against yourself. It's not like football where occasionally an average player will play a blinder and get 30 touches – a 17 minute 5k runner just isn't going to wake up one day and run it in 14 minutes."*



## In focus

With Carmel Meyer

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# no barrier for Rob



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*Ninety-five per cent of it comes down to preparation and how hard you're prepared to work. So for me, the motivation comes from trying to beat your best and constantly improve."*

Rob hasn't had athletics coaching, partly due to family obligations, and admits that a young family necessitates a rather ad hoc approach to training; he is unable to commit to training on a particular day so he trains when he can find the time. Rob accepts that with his kids getting older and as they become more involved in organised sport it's not going to get any easier, "...but I wouldn't have it any other way. Sometimes those late night runs at 9pm can be the most enjoyable!" And whilst he hasn't had any administrative duties associated with his time in athletics, if his children's participation in Little A's is sustained, he can see a time when he will likely become more involved in that side of things as well.

Rob feels lucky to have been able to go to a couple of interstate National Championships – Hobart and Adelaide. Regular readers of TFNL will remember

Rob's thoroughly entertaining account of his experience of the 2014 championships in Hobart. Rob sums up the 2016 World Championships in Perth as a great experience and he can see why so many travel the world to be part of these events. He hopes his body doesn't let him down so that he can attend many more interstate championships in the coming years and decades.

Rob was the steeplechase Open State Champion a few years ago. He says in his self-deprecating way – "This was a far less difficult achievement than it would first appear to be as I was also the only entrant that particular year. I might leave that last bit off the story when my kids are old enough for me to be telling them how good I used to be!" Despite what he might suggest, Rob is a very talented steeplechaser. A tall lithe man, his long stride and rapid turnover propel him around the track and over the barriers with apparent ease. And many of us have felt the rush of air as he rapidly approaches, passes and then laps us on the track!

When asked if he had any other events in his sights Rob says he toyed with the idea

of doing a pentathlon – "I was thinking of doing it for the Nationals in April until I looked at the footy fixtures and realised the derby is on the same day. The fact that I probably wouldn't be much good at anything except the 1500m sealed it, so I'll do the cross country in the morning instead...thus ending my multi-event career." Rob knows calf and Achilles problems are the bane of a lot of track runners and issues with both are something he usually has to deal with most seasons; "I've become pretty good at using tape as a result." In general though, he feels he has been able to avoid the problems with knees and feet that can result in months off the track.

Outside of athletics Rob enjoys playing 20/20 cricket on a Sunday, (especially the fact that it only takes a few hours out of his weekend) and is also a self-confessed armchair sportsman who watches random events like the biathlon or darts. "I get some weird looks when I mention to someone how dominant Martin Fourcade or Michael van Gerwen was last night. As you can imagine, I'm handy at quiz nights if there's a bunch of sport questions, but pretty useless if it's about who won Masterchef!"